

SPECIAL **TIME** EDITION

SPORTS GREATS

INFLUENTIAL ATHLETES WHO CHANGED THE WORLD







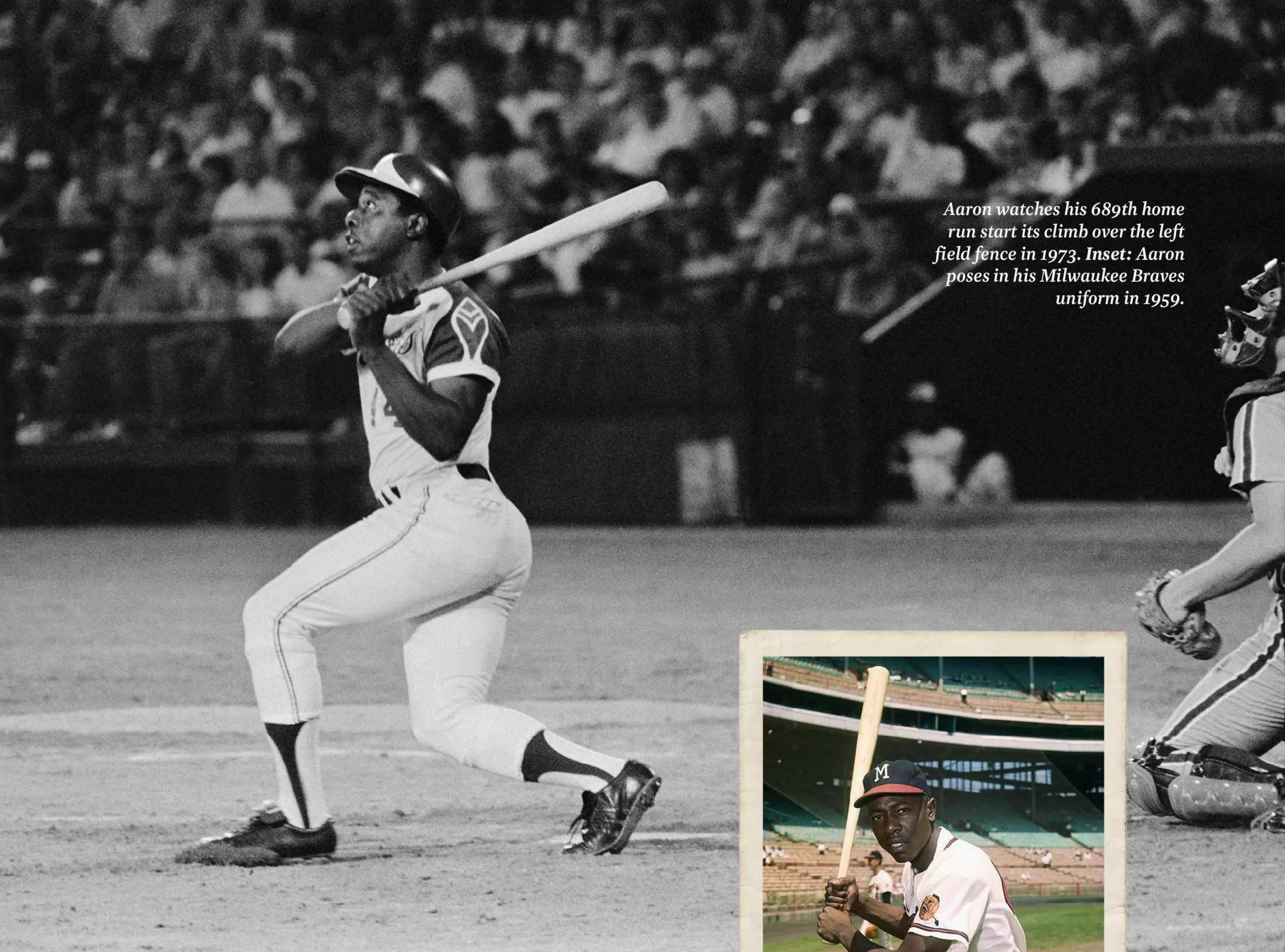
TIME

THE GAME-CHANGERS

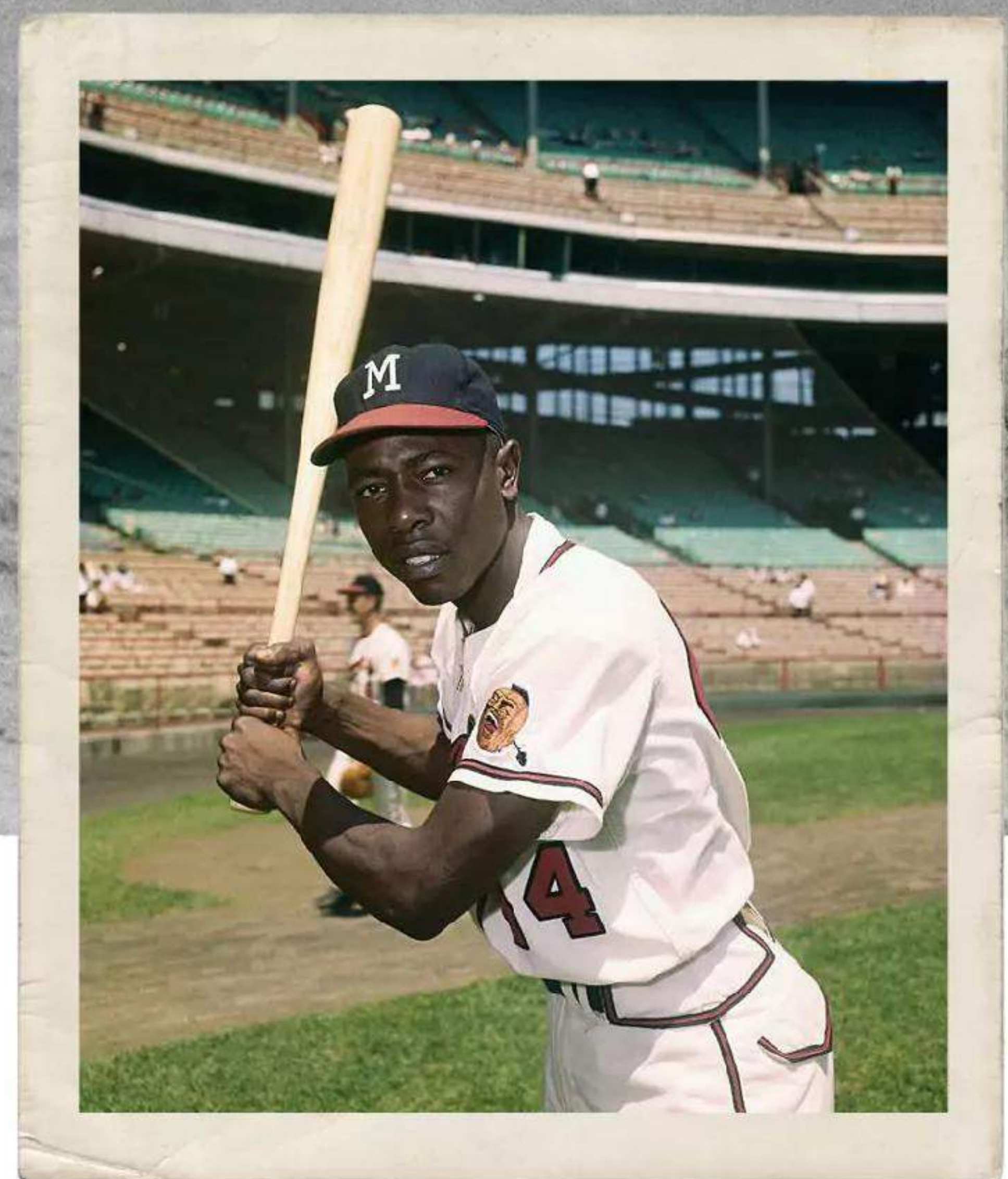
It's awe-inspiring to witness athletic greatness. The human species has strived to achieve physical perfection and mental acuity since our ancestors hunted for food with spears. In our modern times, the strongest and most skilled still reign supreme. We admire, and at times worship, those who are at the top of their game—whether it's on skates or skis, on a track or a pitch, in water or on land, with a ball or a puck. When our heroes fail, we feel the agony. When they accomplish amazing feats, as so many have, we share the glory. The true icons, though, embrace their greatness with integrity and generosity and make a positive impact on their sport and the world around them. These are their stories.

/CONTENTS

**2 HANK AARON 3 KAREEM ABDUL-JABBAR 4 MUHAMMAD ALI 5 MARIO ANDRETTI
6 GIANNIS ANTETOKOUNMPO 7 ARTHUR ASHE 8 SIMONE BILES 9 LARRY BIRD
10 BONNIE BLAIR 11 USAIN BOLT 12 BJORN BORG 13 TOM BRADY 14 KOBE BRYANT
15 DICK BUTKUS 16 CAITLIN CLARK 17 NADIA COMANECI 18 HOWARD COSELL
19 STEPH CURRY 20 BABE DIDRIKSON ZAHARIAS 21 JOE DIMAGGIO 22 NOVAK DJOKOVIC
23 DALE EARNHARDT 24 ROGER FEDERER 25 GEORGE FOREMAN 26 A.J. FOYT
27 JOE FRAZIER 28 LOU GEHRIG 29 STEFFI GRAF 30 WAYNE GRETZKY 31 LEWIS HAMILTON
32 MIA HAMM 33 SONJA HENIE 34 GORDIE HOWE 35 SABRINA IONESCU 36 LEBRON JAMES
37 DAN JANSEN 38 DEREK JETER 39 MAGIC JOHNSON 40 MICHAEL JORDAN
41 JACKIE JOYNER-KERSEE 42 AARON JUDGE 43 TRAVIS KELCE 44 BILLIE JEAN KING
45 OLGA KOR BUT 46 KATIE LEDECKY 47 MARIO LEMIEUX 48 SUGAR RAY LEONARD
49 CARL LEWIS 50 VINCE LOMBARDI 51 JOE LOUIS 52 PATRICK MAHOMES
53 PEYTON MANNING 54 DIEGO MARADONA 55 ROCKY MARCIANO 56 MARTA
57 WILLIE MAYS 58 MESSI 59 CHERYL MILLER 60 JOE MONTANA 61 EDWIN MOSES
62 RAFAEL NADAL 63 MARTINA NAVRATILOVA 64 JACK NICKLAUS 65 SHAQUILLE O'NEAL
66 JESSE OWENS 67 PELE 68 RICHARD PETTY 69 WALTER PAYTON 70 MICHAEL PHELPS
71 MEGAN RAPINOE 72 JERRY RICE 73 MARY LOU RETTON 74 CAL RIPKEN JR.
75 MARIANO RIVERA 76 JACKIE ROBINSON 77 RONALDO 78 BABE RUTH 79 NOLAN RYAN
80 BARRY SANDERS 81 VIN SCULLY 82 MIKAELA SHIFFRIN 83 WILLIE SHOEMAKER
84 EMMITT SMITH 85 ANNIKA SORENSTAM 86 MARK SPITZ 87 SACHIN TENDULKAR
88 JIM THORPE 89 BOB UECKER 90 LINDSEY VONN 91 J.J. WATT 92 SERENA WILLIAMS
93 TED WILLIAMS 94 TIGER WOODS 95 CY YOUNG**



Aaron watches his 689th home run start its climb over the left field fence in 1973. Inset: Aaron poses in his Milwaukee Braves uniform in 1959.



HANK AARON

/ BASEBALL

1934-2021 | With a single swing of a baseball bat through a misty Atlanta evening in 1974, a fast, graceful stroke that sent a ball soaring over the fence in left center field and knocked Babe Ruth right out of the record books, Hank Aaron gave America nothing less than a remedy for its ills. He offered dignity and commitment over putrid cynicism, courage in the face of hatred.

Despite the deep personal toll the chase laid on Aaron, whose family was also threatened during the ordeal, there he stood on the night of April 8, 1974, bearing down on a fastball from Los Angeles Dodgers pitcher Al Downing, putting 715 into the books. Nearly one in four American television sets were tuned in to watch Aaron make history. As he approached second base, stoic on his home-run trot—Aaron might have smiled slightly—he slapped hands with Dodgers second baseman Davey Lopes, who offered congratulations. As he rounded the base, two young white men, who seemed to appear

out of nowhere, ran alongside Aaron. The pair just patted him on the chest and shoulder. Aaron kept his calm, continuing his march, undeterred, toward home plate.

“It is over,” said legendary Dodgers broadcaster Vin Scully, who called the historic game with poetic flair. “And for the first time in a long time that poker face of Aaron shows tremendous relief ... What a marvelous moment for Atlanta and the state of Georgia. What a marvelous moment for the country and the world. A Black man is getting a standing ovation in the Deep South for breaking a record of an all-time baseball idol.” —*with Sean Gregory*

▶ AWARDS & HONORS World Series Champion 1957 > 25-time All-Star > Major League Baseball All-Century Team > National Baseball Hall of Fame > Atlanta Braves No. 44 retired > Milwaukee Brewers No. 44 retired > Presidential Medal of Freedom 2002

KAREEM ABDUL-JABBAR

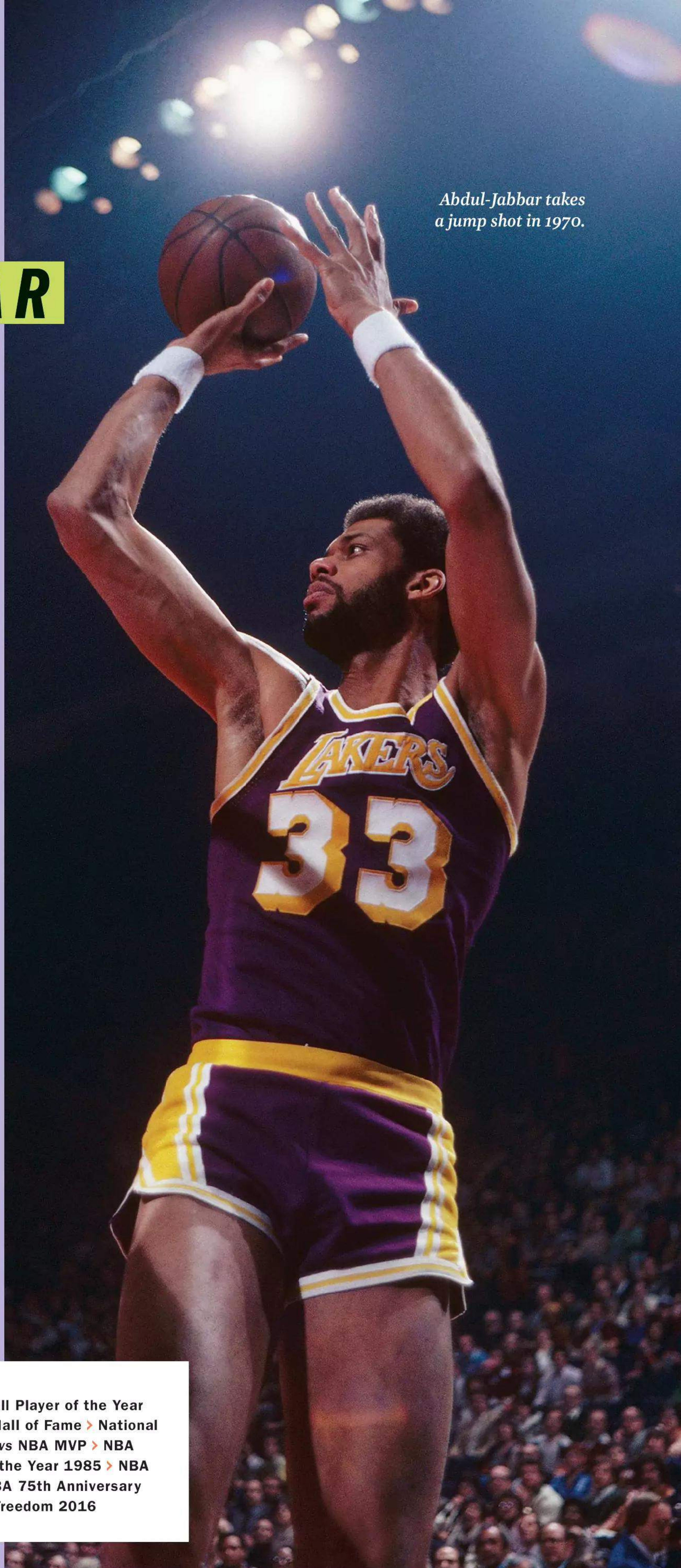
/BASKETBALL

B. 1947 | Six-time NBA champion and record six-time NBA MVP Kareem Abdul-Jabbar dominated the court in the 1970s and 1980s. Abdul-Jabbar, then using his given name of Lew Alcindor, was not eligible to be drafted out of high school, so he played college ball for UCLA, where he led the Bruins to three national championships and was named the outstanding player of the NCAA Tournament a record three times. He was the first overall pick in the 1969 NBA draft, going to the fledgling Milwaukee Bucks, where he led the franchise to their first NBA championship in 1971.

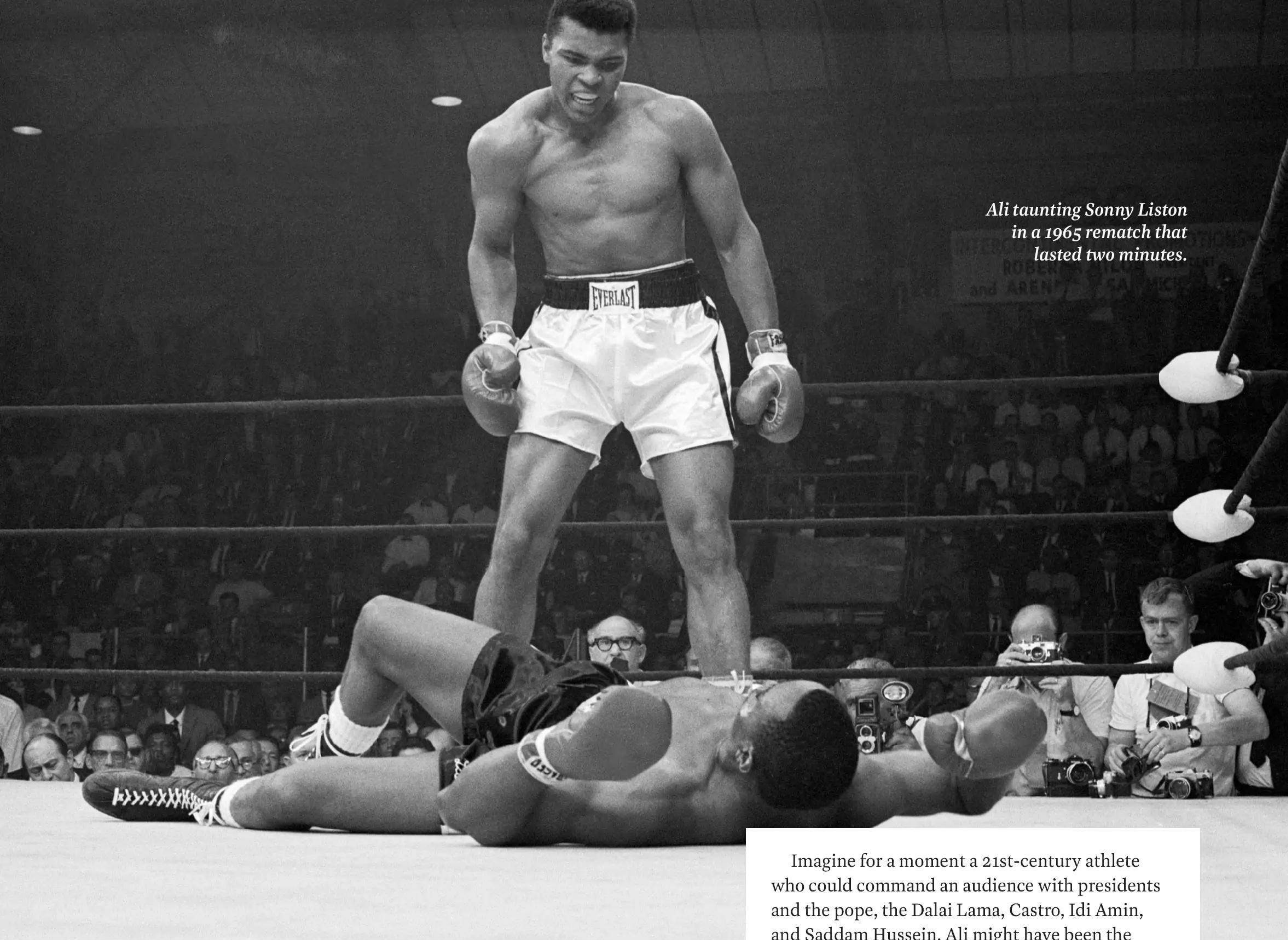
He was traded to the Los Angeles Lakers in 1975, where he spent 14 seasons and won five additional championships. As a center, his job was to score, and score he did. At 7 feet, 2 inches tall, he developed his trademark skyhook shot, where he released the ball into the basket at heights up to 16 feet, making it difficult for defenders to block without goaltending. He finished his playing career in 1989 with 38,387 points, a record he held until 2023. Abdul-Jabbar went on to a coaching career, and won NBA championships in 2010 and 2011 as assistant coach of the Lakers. He is considered by many to be the greatest basketball player of all time.

Abdul-Jabbar became a Muslim in 1971 and has been outspoken about his views on religious intolerance, racism, and other cultural matters. He wrote for *TIME* in 2016, “In the name of human decency, every time we see discrimination, we as athletes and as humans are obligated to attack it. That’s the game we should all be playing.” He is also a bestselling author, having written over a dozen books. He was named a cultural ambassador for the United States by Hillary Clinton in 2012; was appointed to the President’s Council on Sports, Fitness and Nutrition by Barack Obama in 2017; and was appointed to the Citizens Coinage Advisory Committee for the U.S. Department of the Treasury.

Abdul-Jabbar takes a jump shot in 1970.



▶ AWARDS & HONORS AP College Basketball Player of the Year 1967, 1969 ▶ NBA Rookie of the Year 1970 ▶ Basketball Hall of Fame ▶ National Collegiate Basketball Hall of Fame ▶ Six-time *Sporting News* NBA MVP ▶ NBA Finals MVP 1971, 1985 ▶ *Sports Illustrated* Sportsman of the Year 1985 ▶ NBA 35th Anniversary Team ▶ NBA 50th Anniversary Team ▶ NBA 75th Anniversary Team ▶ Double Helix Medal 2011 ▶ Presidential Medal of Freedom 2016



Ali taunting Sonny Liston in a 1965 rematch that lasted two minutes.

MUHAMMAD ALI

/BOXING

1942-2016 | Muhammad Ali, the lyrical heavyweight showman who thrilled the globe with his sublime boxing style, unpredictable wit, and philanthropy—especially later in life—died June 3, 2016, at age 74. Ali, the former Cassius Clay, was not just an athlete who embodied the times in which he lived. He shaped them. His conscientious objection to the Vietnam War and reasoned rants against a country fighting for freedom on the other side of the globe—while its own Black citizens were denied basic rights—energized a generation. When Ali refused to serve in Vietnam, he was convicted of draft evasion and stripped of the heavyweight crown he won from Sonny Liston in 1964.

Imagine for a moment a 21st-century athlete who could command an audience with presidents and the pope, the Dalai Lama, Castro, Idi Amin, and Saddam Hussein. Ali might have been the most famous man on earth. Disease robbed Ali of his speech late in life. But his peacekeeping trips, fundraising efforts for Parkinson's research, and support for UNICEF and the Special Olympics and many more charitable organizations were more powerful than his poetry.

Ali was also a reminder of what boxing has lost. Ali's classic fights like "The Rumble in the Jungle" and "The Thrilla in Manila" were masterpieces of the form. Though Ali fought George Foreman in Zaire, the electricity spilled into America's living rooms. "Bap! Bap! Bap!" Ali told *TIME*, describing his fight strategy before his first bout with Frazier in 1971, the so-called "Fight of the Century," which he lost. "I jab him once, twice, three times. Dance away. I move in again. Bam. Bam. Bam. I hit him five times. He hits me one time. I back away. I'm moving around him. Bim. Bim. Bim. I get him again. He's movin' in, ain't reaching me because he's too small to reach me. He's reachin' and strainin' with those hooks, and they're getting longer and longer. And now he's lunging and jumping, and that's when I started popping and smoking." —with Sean Gregory

► **AWARDS & HONORS** 56 wins in 61 fights (37 KOs) ► Olympic Gold Medal 1960 ► International Boxing Hall of Fame ► U.S. Olympic Hall of Fame ► *TIME* 100: Most Important People of the Century (1999) ► *Sports Illustrated* Sportsman of the Century 1999 ► BBC Sports Personality of the Century 1999

MARIO ANDRETTI

/AUTO RACING

B. 1940 | In 1967, Mario Andretti told *TIME*, “I don’t have any feeling of accomplishment about anything unless there’s a lot of risk to it.” He was already racing automobiles—90-mph Formula Juniors—in Italy at an age when no state in the U.S. would have given him a license to drive the family Volkswagen: 13. “I was crazy,” he agreed. “None of my relatives even knew what I was doing except my old priest uncle, and I had him hiding it because I told him in confession so he couldn’t tell.”

Born near Trieste, Italy, diminutive (5 feet, 6 inches) Mario Andretti came to the U.S. in 1955 and settled in Nazareth, Pennsylvania. He originally intended to be a welder, but gave up that idea when he discovered that he could make more money racing stock cars and midgets on the dirt tracks of Pennsylvania and New Jersey. For a few extra bucks, Andretti took off on an epic racing career that made his name synonymous with speed.

As versatile as he was fast, Andretti is one of three drivers to have won races in Formula One, IndyCar, the World Sportscar Championship, and NASCAR.

He has 109 wins on major circuits, and is the only driver to have been named U.S. Driver of the Year in three different decades (1967, 1978, and 1984). He also completed the Le Mans in four different decades. His 1978 victory in the Dutch Grand Prix is the most recent win for an American driver. Over his career, he won the Daytona 500, the Indianapolis 500, 6 Hours of Daytona, 12 Hours of Sebring (three times), and was an IndyCar champion four times.

Watching Andretti aggressively turn laps made one wonder if he could sense danger. “Sometimes you should wait to pass, and Mario often doesn’t,” fellow driver Parnelli Jones told *TIME* in 1967, a few weeks before the Indianapolis 500. In the same piece, Andretti commented on a few recent crashes, “Oh. I’ve turned over a couple of times, and I’ve been against the wall,” he says. “But I’ve never even broken a bone. When you start thinking you may get hurt, it’s time to get out of racing.”

Racing is a family affair for the Andrettis: His two sons, grandson, brother, two nephews, and great-nephew are also race car drivers.

AWARDS & HONORS

ABC’s *Wide World of Sports* Athlete of the Year 1969 > AP and *RACER* driver of the Century 2000 > Indianapolis Motor Speedway Hall of Fame > National Sprint Car Hall of Fame > Motorsports Hall of Fame of America



Andretti celebrates his Indy 500 win in 1969.

GIANNIS ANTETOKOUNMPO

/ BASKETBALL

B. 1994 | In February 2016, Milwaukee Bucks coach Jason Kidd told 6 foot-11 inch NBA superstar Giannis Antetokounmpo—known as the “Greek Freak” for his homeland and for his ability to dunk a basketball with one foot on the floor—that he’d be the team’s new point guard.

The position requires unique leadership skills; a player must start offensive attacks, shout directions, and distribute the ball to veteran teammates hungry to fatten their stats. The task intimidated him—at 21, he was still the sheepish kid who had leaned on the Eddie Murphy comedy *Coming to America* to learn English. Most other point guards were way more experienced (and far shorter).

But Antetokounmpo delivered. In 2017, he became the youngest player ever to start in the NBA All-Star Game, earned the league’s Most Improved Player Award, and was the first player in NBA history to finish a season in the top 20 for all five major stats: points, rebounds, assists, steals, and blocks. With Antetokounmpo, the Bucks went through a period of success, the likes of which hadn’t been seen since the days of Kareem Abdul-Jabbar in the 1970s, winning division titles from 2019 to 2023 and the NBA Championship in 2021. Antetokounmpo was also named 2021 NBA Finals MVP.

Off the court, Antetokounmpo gives back. In 2022, he and his family (brothers Thanasis, Kostas, and Alex are also pro ball players) launched the Charles Antetokounmpo Family Foundation, an international philanthropic organization named for their late father that supports a wide variety of charities. “I don’t care about the attention, the politics behind it. I just want to help and impact as many lives as we can. And I am able to go at night to sleep with that,” Giannis told the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* in 2023. —with Sean Gregory



Antetokounmpo dribbles down the court at Fiserv Forum in Milwaukee in 2024.

AWARDS & HONORS NBA Champion 2021 > NBA Finals MVP 2021 > NBA MVP 2019, 2020 > Eight-time NBA All-Star > NBA Defensive Player of the Year 2020 > TIME 100 Most Influential People 2020

ARTHUR ASHE

/TENNIS

1943-1993 | There were so many long odds and so many graceful triumphs in the lifetime of Arthur Ashe. More than seem plausible for a Black youngster from segregated Richmond, Virginia, whose ticket to worldwide renown and recognition was punched in a sport that was almost the definition of a game for white people. More than seem reasonable for a man who suffered the first of several heart attacks at age 36, while at the peak of his considerable game. More than seemed attainable in 1992 when he announced to stunned observers, who wept with him, that he had AIDS—probably the result of a blood transfusion after a second bypass operation, in 1983.

The tears did not last. Ashe, the pragmatist, wiped them away and set out to teach the ignorant lessons about ourselves, intent on educating the public about the nature of the disease. His crusade was short-lived—he died less than a year after revealing his diagnosis.

Ashe also confronted racism with intention, grace, and dignity. In 1955, Ashe was turned away from the Richmond city tennis tournament because of his color. But that merely presented an opportunity to turn the other cheek: “Drummed into me above all, by my dad, by the whole family, was that without your good name, you would be nothing,” he said. In 1973, members of the African National Congress did not welcome Ashe when he arrived to play in the South African Open in Johannesburg, telling him he should go home. Ashe listened and replied evenly, “Small concessions incline toward larger ones.”

Ashe after beating Jimmy Connors at Wimbledon in 1975.



Ashe is the only Black man to have won the singles title at Wimbledon, the U.S. Open, and the Australian Open, and, in 1963, became the first Black man to be selected for the United States Davis Cup team. During his career that spanned from 1969 to 1980, he won three Grand Slam titles in singles and two in doubles.

The Association of Tennis Professionals' Arthur Ashe Humanitarian Award was named for him in 1983, and Arthur Ashe Stadium, the main stadium for the U.S. Open and the largest in the world, opened in 1997. —with Paul Witteman

▶ **AWARDS & HONORS** ATP Player of the Year 1975 ▶ BBC World Sport Star of the Year 1975 ▶ ATP Sportsmanship Award 1977 ▶ Intercollegiate Tennis Association Hall of Fame ▶ International Tennis Hall of Fame ▶ Presidential Medal of Freedom

SIMONE BILES

/GYMNASTICS

B. 1997 | As the greatest of all time in a sport that captivates the globe every four years, Simone Biles is all about control. Her life is dedicated to micromanaging every possible element—her diet, her training, her sleep—that goes into performing, so when the lights are brightest, and the stakes highest, little is left to chance. But for Biles, control isn't just about winning; it can be the difference between life and death. Avoiding disaster requires a constant, firm grip on mental acuity.

On July 27, 2021, however, the careful tapestry of control that Biles, 24, had stitched began to unravel. Or at least started to, until she responded in a way that stunned millions of viewers around the world. In the middle of the Olympics for which she had trained for five years, and which was supposed to be the triumphant capstone on a historic career, Biles slipped on her warm-up suit, packed her competition bag and told her teammates she wouldn't be competing with them, but rather cheering them on in the team event. Her mind and body weren't in sync, she said, which put her at serious risk. She also withdrew from her next four events, returning only to participate in the final one. At an Olympics in which five gold medals for Biles seemed preordained, she won a team silver and a balance-beam bronze.

In doing so, Biles brought mental health to the forefront of the cultural conversation, particularly for athletes. Said teammate Sunisa Lee, "What Simone did changed the

way we view our well-being, 100%. It showed us that we are more than the sport, that we are human beings who also can have days that are hard. It really humanized us."

Biles is the most decorated American gymnast in history: She has 7 Olympic medals (4 gold), 23 World Championships, and 2 Pacific Rim Championships.

Five elements in the Women's Artistic Gymnastics Code of Points are named for her—two on vault, two on floor exercise, and one on balance beam—and she's not done yet. —with Sean Gregory and Alice Park

AWARDS & HONORS

Team USA Female Olympic Athlete of the Year 2015

► BBC World Sport Star of the Year 2016 ► ESPY

Award for Best Female Athlete 2017 ► American Academy of Achievement Golden Plate Award 2017

► TIME Athlete of the Year 2021 ► Presidential Medal of Freedom



Biles soars above the balance beam at the 2020 Olympics in Tokyo. Inset: Biles shows off her bronze medal at the 2020 Games.



LARRY BIRD

/ BASKETBALL

B. 1956 | With a sigh that warned *this is going to sound crazy*, basketball hall-of-famer Bob Cousy told TIME in 1982: “In five years everyone will say it. But I’m ready to say it now. Larry Bird is the best player who ever played this foolish game.”

This “best player” was an uncomplicated farm hand who was raised in a poor family. Bird was nicknamed “Hick from French Lick” referring to his rural upbringing in French Lick, Indiana. When asked about the condition of a busted thumb or punctured cheekbone, Bird would reply: “Broke.”

Bird may have been countrified, but he was canny. “I’m pretty smart on the court, if not so smart in real life,” said Bird in the same TIME article, hinting he was not too dumb anywhere. “He has an instinct,” Cousy said, “a natural feeling for the sport, vision, long arms, unselfish attitude. ... He’s the most innovative player.” His specialty: one-time-only passes for one-time-only plays. Cousy is often called the best passer ever, and he thought Bird was better.

“Bird is not a great leaper, just has a sense of when to go up for a rebound. He doesn’t have the explosive speed of Dr. J, for instance, just the required speed. Bird simply has no weaknesses. After only three seasons, you’re inclined to say: ‘Let a little history go by before saying anyone is the best.’ But I just don’t think there has ever been such a complete player.”

That was in 1982, but Bird’s on-court tenure with the Celtics spanned 10 more years; later, he was an executive with the Celtics, and a coach and executive with the Indiana Pacers. It appears Cousy made a solid call early on: Bird is the only person in the NBA who has been named Rookie of the Year (1980), All-Star MVP (1982), Most Valuable Player (1984-1986), Finals MVP (1984, 1986), Coach of the Year (1988), and Executive of the Year (2012).

True to his small-town roots, Bird is humble about his philanthropy. “I don’t need the publicity. I’m not doing it for the publicity. But I do care. And that’s what matters most,” he said at a 2014 charity event in Indiana. —with Tom Callahan

Bird prepares to shoot a free throw during the Celtics’ epic 1985-86 season.



▶ AWARDS & HONORS NBA Champion 1981, 1984, 1986 > AP Athlete of the Year 1986 > Olympic Gold Medal 1992 > NBA Lifetime Achievement Award 2019 > Boston Celtics No. 33 retired > Indiana State Sycamores No. 33 retired > Basketball Hall of Fame > Naismith Memorial Hall of Fame > College Basketball Hall of Fame > U.S. Olympic Hall of Fame > FIBA Hall of Fame

BONNIE BLAIR

/SPEED SKATING

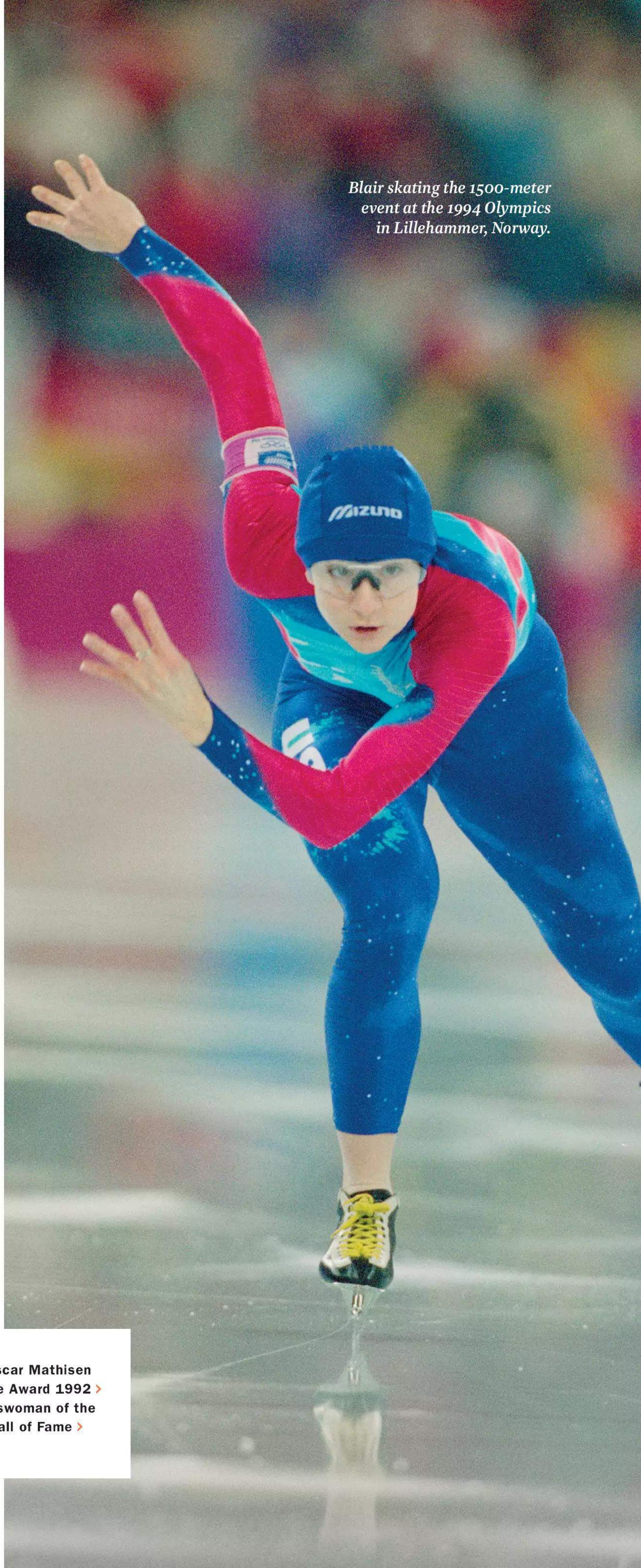
B. 1964 | Bonnie Blair, the youngest of six children, first ventured onto the ice with her shoes inside the smallest pair of figure skates her mother could find. “Skating was always part of our lives, and of course it became part of Bonnie’s,” her mother, Eleanor Blair, told TIME in 1988. It is said that Bonnie’s father, Charlie, learned of the birth of Bonnie, “yet another skater,” over the public address system at the local rink.

Blair made her Olympic debut at the 1984 games in Sarajevo when she was 19. The U.S. team failed to medal that year, so Blair set her sights on training for the 1988 Olympics in Calgary, improving her speed and winning World Cup and World Championship races along the way. In Calgary, Blair, then 23, earned the moniker “Bonnie the Blur.” In the 500-meter sprint, East Germany’s Christa Rothenburger set a new world record in her heat: 39.12 seconds. Then it was Blair’s turn—she broke Rothenburger’s minutes-old record and crossed the finish line at 39.10 seconds, winning the gold. Afterward, Blair revealed her fierce competitiveness to TIME, “I still think the 500 can be done in under 39 seconds. I’d like to be the first to prove it.” In Calgary, Blair also skated a personal best in the 1,000 meters to win a bronze medal. Blair was chosen as the American flag bearer for the closing ceremonies.

At the 1992 Olympics in Albertville, France, she won gold again in the 500-meter sprint, becoming the first woman to win back-to-back golds in the event. She also won gold in the 1,000 meters.

Blair went on to win golds in the 500 meters and 1,000 meters in her final Olympics in 1994. She became the first American female Olympian to win five gold medals and the first American Winter Olympian to win six career medals.

Blair skating the 1500-meter event at the 1994 Olympics in Lillehammer, Norway.



► AWARDS & HONORS Sullivan Award 1992 ► Oscar Mathisen Award 1992 ► American Academy of Achievement Golden Plate Award 1992 ► AP Female Athlete of the Year 1994 ► *Sports Illustrated* Sportswoman of the Year 1994 ► U.S. Olympic Hall of Fame ► Chicagoland Sports Hall of Fame ► Wisconsin Athletic Hall of Fame

USAIN BOLT

/TRACK & FIELD

B. 1986 | Eight-time Olympic gold medalist Usain Bolt, aka “Lightning Bolt,” started sprinting as a boy in the Jamaican parish of Trelawny, a sugar-farming area that was the former stronghold of the Maroons, Jamaica’s 18th century freedom fighters who resisted British attempts to enslave them. Bolt’s father ordered his lanky son to carry buckets of water for miles to their home, which had no running water.

Lugging all that water proved to be valuable training. Bolt won gold in the 100 meters and 200 meters in the 2008, 2012, and 2016 Olympics—the only sprinter to have done so in three consecutive Games. He also won gold twice in 4 x 100-meter relays (2012 and 2016). He holds world records in all three—having run 9.58 seconds in the 100-meter sprint at the 2009 World Championships in Berlin, a 19.19 in the 200 meters at the same competition, and a 36.84, shared with his relay teammates, at the 2012 London Olympics. He is also an 11-time World Champion.

Bolt would have triple-triple golds, but a sample taken from a relay teammate in the 2008 Olympic relay was retested in 2017 and revealed a banned substance. The Jamaican team was stripped of the

medal, which Bolt later told *The Guardian* was “heartbreaking.”

Bolt is known for his confidence and charisma, which draws legions of fans. “The crowd loves the energy. Hopefully, younger athletes can understand that the sport is looking for people who are full of energy,” he told *TIME*.

With his record running times, Bolt stretched the limits of human achievement, sending physicists scrambling to explain what made him so special—in essence, his longer, stronger legs create more ground force to propel him forward—and ponder the possibility of anyone on the planet ever running faster. —with Sean Gregory

▶ AWARDS & HONORS Six-time IAAF World Athlete of the Year ▶ Track & Field Athlete of the Year 2008, 2009 ▶ BBC World Sport Star of the Year 2008, 2009 ▶ Five-time Jamaican Sportman of the Year ▶ Laureus World Sportsman of the Year 2009, 2010, 2013, 2017 ▶ *TIME* 100 Most Influential People 2016 ▶ Marca Leyenda 2019 ▶ Commander of the Order of Distinction ▶ Order of Jamaica member



Bolt after breaking the world record for the 200-meter at the 2008 Olympics in Beijing.

BJORN BORG

/TENNIS

B. 1956 | When he was at the top of his game, Bjorn Borg, at 5 feet, 11 inches and 165 pounds, was lean as a greyhound, his limbs long and supple, his shoulders almost incongruously broad. He practiced at tournament speed four hours each day to keep in condition. No other player spent more time in workouts. Sweden's Davis Cup captain Lennart Bergelin explained Borg's success with two gestures. First he slaps his thigh: "It's all here." Then he points to his head: "And here."

Borg was a teen sensation who boosted the popularity of tennis in the 1970s. At 15, he helped Sweden's Davis Cup team to a first-round victory in the European Zone competitions. He was then the youngest player ever to take part in a Davis Cup competition. At 17, he won the French Open Tennis Championship, a title he captured six times. At the time, he was the youngest man ever to win one of tennis' grand-slam events. At 20, he won his first Wimbledon title in a straight-set trouncing of Ilie Nastase, then went on to win it four more times.

At 22, he was victorious in six consecutive tournaments and three round-robin events—in all, 55 straight matches. Along the way, he tied England's Fred Perry's record for three consecutive Wimbledon titles. He won two more before retiring in 1981.

Borg was self-taught and developed an unconventional playing style, which included his consistent use of topspin, which made the ball fly several feet above the net, then drop down into play. After the ball cleared the net, it fell shorter and bounced higher than if it was hit with a conventional shot. Said legendary tennis coach Vic Braden: "Bjorn can make the ball drop so fast it will untie your shoelaces. If you want to get back far enough to take it on the bounce, you've gotta call a cab."

He also possessed icy determination and grace under pressure, earning him the nickname "Ice Borg." Said Ilie Nastase, "In the locker room he might not talk to anyone for an hour. They should send Borg to another planet. We play tennis. He plays something else." —with B.J. Phillips

AWARDS & HONORS

ATP No. 1 ranked player for 109 weeks > BBC World Sport Star of the Year 1979 > International Tennis Hall of Fame > BBC Lifetime Achievement Award

Borg during a match at Wimbledon in 1981.





Brady after the Patriots defeated the Seattle Seahawks at the Super Bowl in 2015.

TOM BRADY

/FOOTBALL

B. 1977 | Tom Brady retired from the NFL in 2023 as a seven-time Super Bowl champ with records in passing yards and touchdown passes. He made his Super Bowl debut as a second-year quarterback in 2002 and secured six titles for the New England Patriots. His seventh Super Bowl ring came with the Tampa Bay Buccaneers in 2021.

In his last year on the gridiron, Brady was the oldest active player in the NFL, but his personal performance was still strong. His team finished the season with an 8-9 record and lost to the Dallas Cowboys in the wild card round of the playoffs.

Brady left the game at 45½ years old, more than six years older than the next-oldest NFL starter and the oldest starting quarterback for the seventh

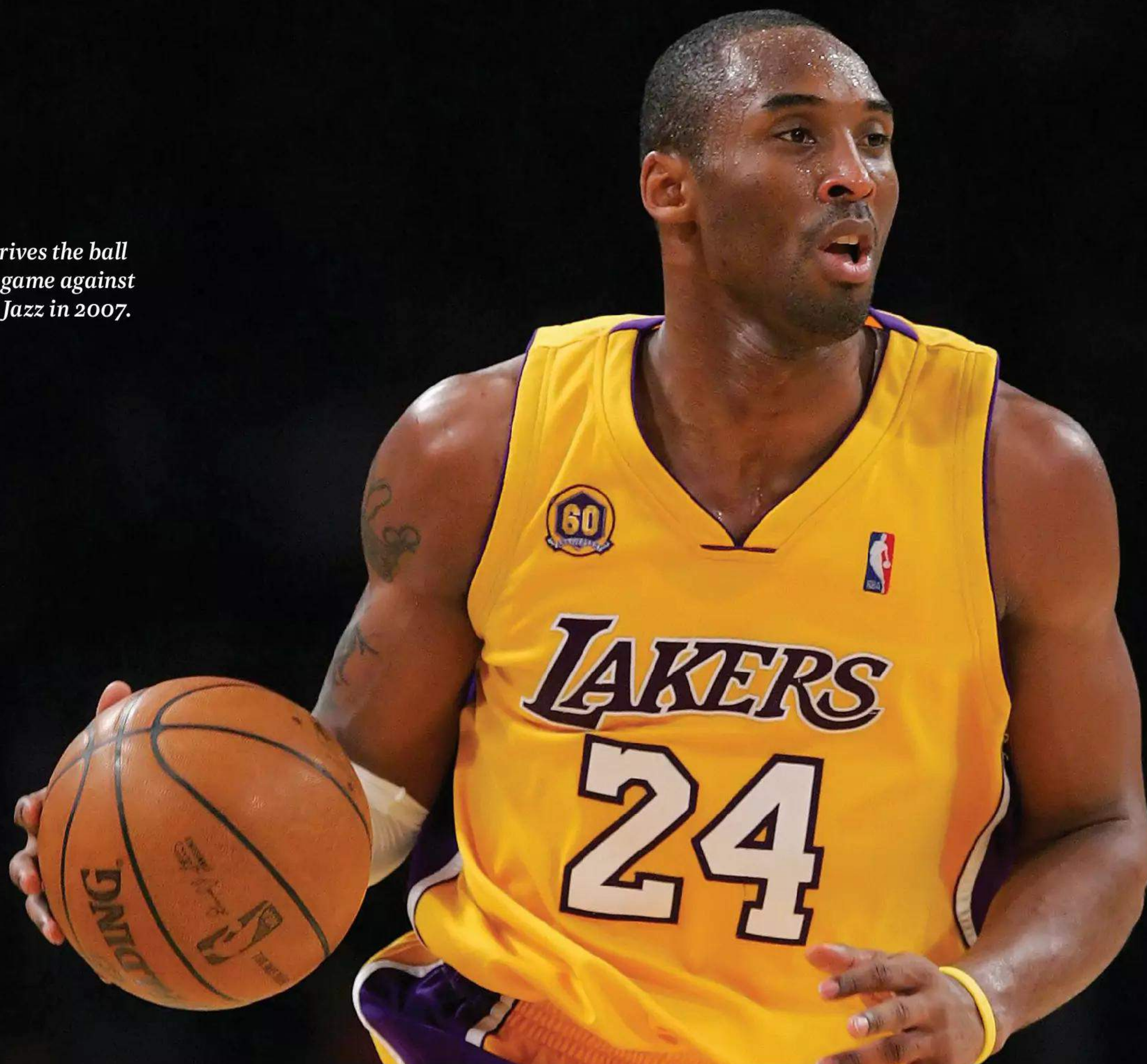
season in a row. His consistent greatness and exceptional longevity made him one of the most recognizable figures in the NFL. He played for 23 professional seasons—the average quarterback lasts around four. During that time, he competed in 381 regular season and playoff games, the fourth most in NFL history by any player.

But all careers have to end at some point, and Brady finished as the seventh oldest player in NFL history behind George Blanda (48), Morten Anderson (47), Adam Vinatieri (46), John Carney (46), Bobby Marshall (45) and Gary Anderson (45). All of these players were placekickers except for Marshall, who played defensive end for two seasons in the 1920s. In 2021, Brady surpassed Steve DeBerg (44) as the oldest quarterback to start a NFL game.

While his athletic career may be over, Brady took on a number of high-profile projects, including a 10-year contract with Fox Sports worth \$375 million. He also has a clothing brand called BRADY, a wellness brand called TB12 Sports, and his production company, 199 Productions. —with Armani Syed and Nik Popli

▶ AWARDS & HONORS Seven-time Super Bowl Champion ▶ Five-time Super Bowl MVP ▶ Sports Illustrated Athlete of the Year 2005, 2021 ▶ NFL MVP 2007, 2010, 2017 ▶ NFL 2000s All-Decade Team ▶ NFL 2010s All-Decade Team ▶ NFL 100th Anniversary Team ▶ TIME 100 Most Influential People 2021 ▶ AP Male Athlete of the Year 2007 ▶ Bert Bell Award 2007 ▶ New England Patriots Hall of Fame

Bryant drives the ball during a game against the Utah Jazz in 2007.



KOBE BRYANT

/ BASKETBALL

1978-2020 | During his 20-year career with the Los Angeles Lakers, Kobe Bryant won five NBA championships, made 18 All-Star teams, won an MVP award, two scoring titles, and two Olympic gold medals. He finished his NBA career with 33,643 points, good for fourth on the NBA's all-time scoring list.

Bryant craved competition and broke down basketball like a scholar; his brain was as elevated as his body. Bryant skipped college to take over the NBA, but after one conversation with him, you just sensed he would have thrived in the classroom, the boardroom, or any path he chose.

But he was complicated. Never cuddly, he could be ruthless to his underperforming teammates. Critics called him selfish and knocked him for not passing the ball. He embraced his villainy, real or contrived, creating a pop philosophy he called "The Mamba Mentality." It was an approach to life that required extreme focus, discipline, and enthusiasm for taking on all comers.

"I always aimed to kill the opposition," he once wrote. The Mamba grew into an iconic persona all its own.

Bryant's 2015-2016 goodbye season served as a coronation to his basketball greatness. In the final game of his career on his home court, he went full Mamba: He scored 60 points on 50 shots.

In one of the most stunning and tragic losses in the history of sports and global celebrity, Bryant died in a helicopter crash near Los Angeles on January 26, 2020, along with eight others, including his daughter Gianna, 13. He was 41 years old. Though he wasn't cut down in the prime of his basketball career, Bryant had so much more to give. For example, he won an Oscar in 2018 for Best Animated Short Film, "Dear Basketball." Deciphering Bryant's post-NBA plans became a parlor game among Kobe-watchers. Would he coach? Own a team? Go Hollywood mogul? He could have done it all, and maybe would have.

—with Sean Gregory

▶ **AWARDS & HONORS** NBA Champion 2000, 2001, 2002, 2009, 2010 ▶ 18-time NBA All-Star ▶ NBA MVP 2008 ▶ NBA Finals MVP 2009, 2010 ▶ Basketball Hall of Fame ▶ NBA 75th Anniversary Team ▶ Los Angeles Lakers Nos. 18 and 24 retired

DICK BUTKUS

/FOOTBALL

1942-2023 | On the gridiron, Dick Butkus was feared. The ferocious tackler, who played his entire career in his home state of Illinois, was captain of the Fighting Illini football team his senior year and was selected by the Chicago Bears and the Denver Broncos in the 1965 draft. Although the Broncos offered him more money, Butkus chose to play for his hometown of Chicago.

The late '60s and early '70s were tough on the Bears, the worst season being 1969, when they won just one game. But that didn't stop Butkus. As a rookie, he was named an AP first-team All-Pro and played in his first of eight straight Pro Bowls. In 1966, he was named second-team All-Pro by the AP, United Press International (UPI), Newspaper Enterprise Association (NEA), and the *New York Daily News*, behind Green Bay Packer powerhouse Ray Nitschke. In '67, he nabbed first-team spots on UPI and NEA, reclaimed the AP spot in '68, and the *Daily News* spot in '69, and was named first-team by all four outlets in 1970. He was featured on the cover of the September 1970 *Sports Illustrated* issue with the caption, "The most feared man in the game."

He led the Bears in tackles and interceptions in the 1971 season (117 and four, respectively) and caught a pass to score against Washington at the end of what is now a legendary game in Chicagoland. In 1972, Butkus was again named first-team by all four outlets and played in his final Pro Bowl. His last season, 1973, was cut short by an injury that forced him to retire at age 31.

Although championship rings eluded him, Butkus' reputation as an intense competitor made him a household name. He went on to be a celebrity endorser, broadcaster, TV and film actor, and coach. As a man from humble beginnings, Butkus believed in giving back. He started the Butkus Foundation to support health and wellness initiatives, and, in 1985, established the prestigious Butkus Award, which is given each year to the top linebackers at the high school, college, and professional levels.

► **AWARDS & HONORS** Pro Football Hall of Fame ► College Football Hall of Fame ► Illinois Athletics Hall of Fame ► Chicagoland Sports Hall of Fame ► NFL 75th Anniversary All-Time Team ► NFL 100th Anniversary All-Time Team ► Walter Camp Football Association All-Century Team ► Chicago Bears No. 51 retired ► Fighting Illini No. 50 retired



Butkus in action against the rival Green Bay Packers at Lambeau Field in 1973.

CAITLIN CLARK

/BASKETBALL

B. 2002 | Much of the country became familiar with Caitlin Clark during the 2023 NCAA championship game, when Clark, who's known for her on-court trash talk, received a ribbing from LSU's Angel Reese near the end of the Tigers' victory. In case you missed it: With the victory in hand, LSU's Angel Reese covered her face in front of Clark, mimicking Clark's "you can't see me" gesture, which she had deployed during an earlier NCAA tournament game. Reese followed this up by approaching Clark and pointing to her ring finger, a less subtle level of taunting. "I'm about to get a championship ring," Reese was saying. "And you're not."

Social media went wild, as it does, but many credit the nation's unprecedented interest in women's basketball to the grandstanding and Clark's illustrious college career with the Iowa Hawkeyes. In 2024, Clark became the all-time leading scorer in NCAA basketball history. Her ability to sink 30-foot-and-beyond three-pointers, à la Steph Curry, with unquestionable swagger has captivated the country.

Clark, an Iowa native, was named Big Ten Freshman of the Year in her first season with the Hawkeyes, and with an average of 26.6 points per game, led the Big Ten in scoring. Her sophomore year, she became the first women's player to lead Division 1 in both points and assists, and the Hawkeyes cinched

the Big Ten tournament title. In 2023, the Hawkeyes won it again and advanced to their first-ever championship game in the program's history. Clark, whose averaged 27.8 points per game, won all major national player of the year awards. In 2024, Clark shattered scoring records and led the Hawkeyes to their third straight Big Ten title, racking up a triple-double of 34 points, 11 rebounds, and 10 assists in the championship game. She then led the Hawkeyes to the Final Four, but South Carolina took the title.

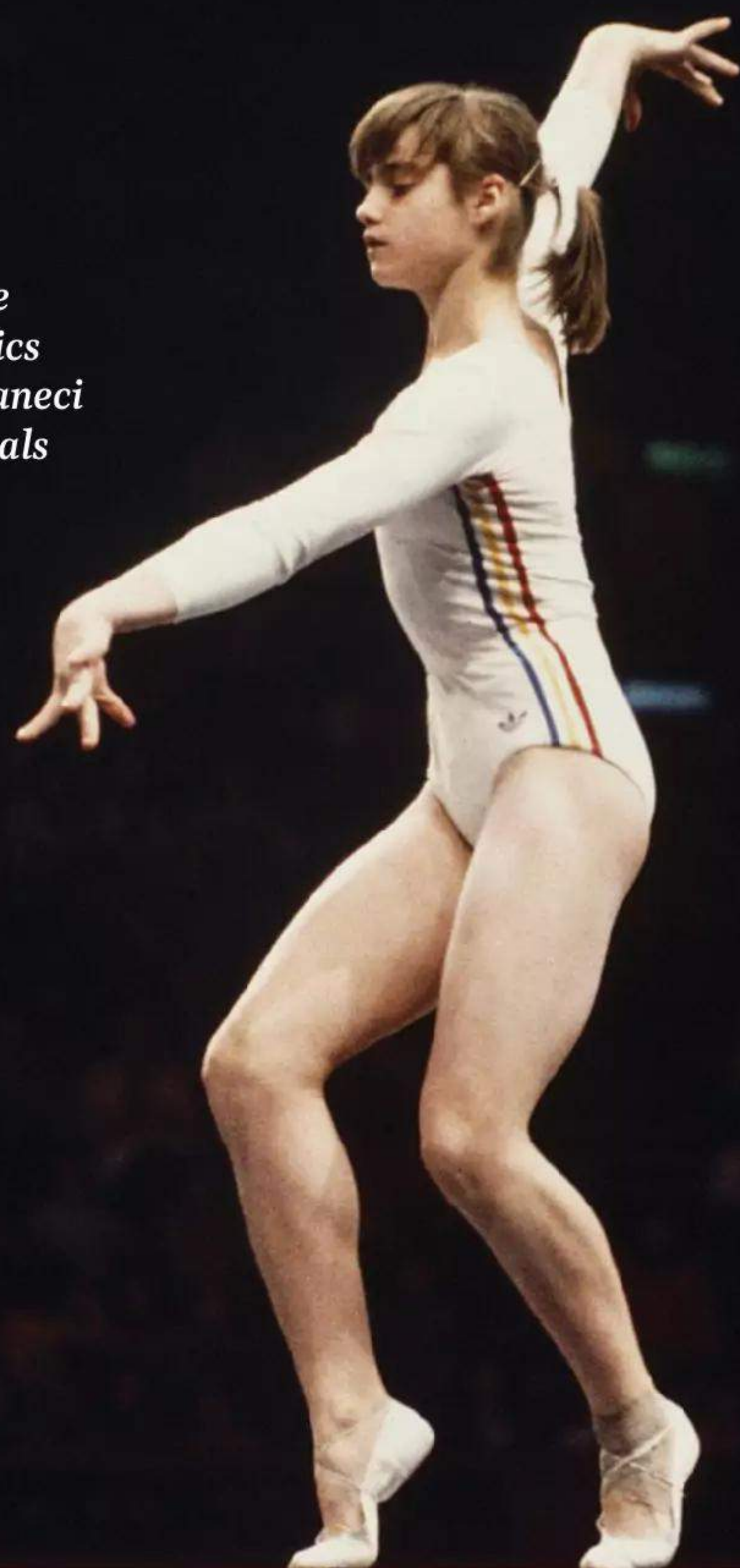
Clark was the biggest star in college hoops, and is now a star in the pros. She signed with the WNBA's Indiana Fever in April 2024, and inked a multyear Michael Jordan-esque deal with Wilson Athletics Co. in May. —with Sean Gregory

▶ **AWARDS & HONORS** Big Ten Freshman of the Year 2021
▶ Big Ten Player of the Year 2022, 2023, 2024 ▶ AP Player of the Year 2023, 2024 ▶ Honda Sports Award 2023, 2024 ▶ John R. Wooden Award 2023, 2024
▶ Naismith College Player of the Year 2023, 2024 ▶ USBWA National Player of the Year 2023, 2024 ▶ Wade Trophy 2023, 2024 ▶ James E. Sullivan Award 2023, 2024 ▶ Iowa Hawkeyes No. 22 retired



Clark celebrates breaking the NCAA all-time scoring record in February 2024.

Comaneci on the balance beam at the 1976 Olympics in Montreal. Inset: Comaneci with one of her gold medals at the '76 Games.



NADIA COMĂNECI

/GYMNASTICS

BORN 1961 | In 1976, Romanian Nadia Comaneci, age 14, became the first gymnast to earn a perfect score in the modern Olympic Games, which date back to 1896. She earned the 10 mark six more times that year, and four years later, she earned two more. Comaneci won nine Olympic medals for Romania, then under Communist rule.

Known for her steely reserve, she was discovered by legendary gymnastics coach Béla Károlyi when she was just 6 years old. He was impressed by her lack of fear. “At first it was like a game,” said Comaneci after the 1976 Games, showing no trace of nostalgia for her presumably more carefree days. “But by the age of 8,” Coach Károlyi noted, “the students must be serious about gymnastics.”

When asked how she felt about becoming the focus of world adulation after her perfect 10s, Comaneci deadpanned: “It’s nothing special. I feel

just the same as before.” Did she ever think she might not win a gold medal? “No, I knew that I would win.” Deadpan too was the way the press in Romania handled her conquests; the achievements of the team as a whole were extolled, instead of Comaneci’s.

In 1981, Karolyi and his wife, Marta, defected to the United States. Romanian officials feared Comaneci would do the same, so they imposed severe restrictions on her travel. She was allowed to attend the 1984 Summer Games in Los Angeles and a few other events. She retired in 1984, and defected in 1989, a few weeks before the Romanian Revolution. In 2001, she became a naturalized U.S. citizen but retained her Romanian citizenship.

Today, she and her husband, Bart Conner (who also scored two perfect 10s in gymnastics at the 1984 Olympics), are still involved in the sport. She is the honorary president of the Romanian Gymnastics Federation and the Romanian Olympic Committee, the sports ambassador of Romania, and a member of the International Gymnastics Federation Foundation. She also supports a number of charities, including the Nadia Comaneci Children’s Clinic in Bucharest.



AWARDS & HONORS

AP Athlete of the Year 1976 > BBC World Sport Star of the Year 1976
> UPI Athlete of the Year Award 1976, 1977 > Olympic Order 1984, 2004 > International Gymnastics Hall of Fame > International Women’s Sports Hall of Fame > Order of the Star of Romania



Cosell covering an event
for ABC in 1975.



HOWARD COSELL

/SPORTSCASTER

1918-1995 | Love him or hate him, Howard Cosell left his mark in sports media. Wordy, brash, and grandiose, the former trial attorney had a natural gift for annoying, but at least his style was infinitely more lively than the usual “golly-gee-you’re-terrific” sports interviews on TV. He was among the first sports broadcasters to use an intellectual, hard news approach. “I’ve gotten where I’ve gotten in the world of sport just by applying the principles of journalism,” he told *TIME* in 1968. Cosell did get his share of scoops; he was the first, for example, to report Wilt Chamberlain’s move from the Philadelphia 76ers to the Los Angeles Lakers. But it was more his capacity for outrage than reporting that made him so hard to turn off.

Unabashedly confident, Cosell embraced his reputation, telling *TIME*, “Face it. Sport is the toy department of life.” Cosell was its jumping jack, punch-me clown, and big bad wolf. His signature toupee and droning, buzz saw voice were enough to rattle cages, but what he did and said generated headlines. Cosell, unlike many other commentators, pointedly used Muhammad Ali’s Muslim name after Ali adopted it in 1964. Cosell was also the first to defend Ali when he was stripped of his heavyweight boxing title in 1967 after refusing to be drafted into

the U.S. Army. As a lawyer, Cosell maintained that Ali’s constitutional rights had been violated when his title was stripped without due process. Cosell and Ali had always had a colorful relationship and remained friends until Cosell’s death.

In 1982, just weeks after boxer Duk Koo Kim died after a brutal bout with Ray Mancini, Cosell covered a similar fight between Larry Holmes and Randall “Tex” Cobb. After the fight, Cosell abruptly quit covering boxing.

Before he got into broadcasting, Cosell was a successful specialist in corporate and labor law. On the side, he helped organize Little League baseball in the New York area. In 1953, ABC asked him to form a panel of Little Leaguers for a radio quiz show on sports, which he did for free. Two years later, he tried a few test shots on weekend sports reports, and eventually gave up his legal career for the mike in 1956. He covered sports for ABC from 1953 to 1985 and was a commentator for ABC’s *Monday Night Football* from 1970 to 1983.

AWARDS & HONORS National Sportscasters and Sportswriters Hall of Fame > International Jewish Sports Hall of Fame > Television Academy Hall of Fame



Curry attempts a 3-pointer during a game against the Milwaukee Bucks in 2022.

STEPH CURRY

/BASKETBALL

B. 1988 | By NCAA basketball standards, 6-foot-2-inch Steph Curry is not a big guy. That's why, despite having a solid high-school hoops career, the son of the Charlotte Hornets' all-time leading scorer didn't receive any scholarship offers. So he chose to play for tiny Davidson College in Charlotte and was an instant star. He finished his freshman season with an average 21.6 points per game—top scorer in the Southern Conference and second in the country. His sophomore year, he led Davidson to the Elite Eight, largely due to his signature 3-pointers. He finished his junior year as the NCAA Division 1 scoring leader and a first-team All-American. Curry then entered the 2009 NBA draft and was the seventh overall pick by the Golden State Warriors.

He was voted onto the Rookie First Team unanimously after his first season with the Warriors, making 166 three-pointers, the most by a rookie in NBA history. During the 2014-2015 season, he scored a then-record 286 three-pointers. He averaged 23.8 points, 7.7 assists, and 2 steals per game, and was named the NBA MVP, then led the Warriors to their first championship in 40 years. The 2015-2016 season was even better. At its close, Curry made 402 threes, was the league's leading scorer, and was the first-ever unanimous selection for NBA MVP. In 2016-2017, he led the Warriors to an unprecedented 12-win streak and they won the Western Conference title and their second championship. Another NBA title followed in 2017-2018, and the Warriors closed the 2018-2019 season with their record-breaking fifth straight Western Conference title, with Curry earning first-team All-NBA honors.

In December 2021, Curry broke the NBA record for all-time three-point goals scored: 2,974. The 2021-2022 season brought the Warriors their fourth championship win, with finals MVP Curry averaging 31.2 points per game during the six-game series. In 2023, he became the first NBA player to score 4,000 career threes.

In 2019, Curry and wife, Ayesha, founded the Eat. Learn. Play Foundation to offer nutritious meals, quality reading resources, and recreation opportunities to kids in Oakland, California.

▶ AWARDS & HONORS

NBA Sportsmanship Award 2011 ▶ AP Male Athlete of the Year 2015 ▶ Eight-time ESPY Award Winner ▶ TIME 100 Most Influential People 2016 ▶ NBA 75th Anniversary Team 2021 ▶ Sports Illustrated Sportsperson of the Year 2018 (as a team), 2022 (solo) ▶ Sports Illustrated 50 Most Influential Figures in Sports 2023 ▶ Davidson Athletics Hall of Fame ▶ Southern Conference Hall of Fame

BABE DIDRIKSON ZAHARIAS

/GOLF, BASKETBALL, BASEBALL, TRACK & FIELD

1911-1956 | Babe Didrikson was a multi-sport athlete who rose to fame at the 1932 Los Angeles Olympics, setting records and winning gold medals in the 80-meter hurdles and javelin throw. She also earned a silver medal in high jump in Los Angeles that year.

At the 1932 Women's U.S. Olympic trials, Didrikson competed as a team by herself and won five individual events and tied for the sixth (80-meter hurdles, high jump, javelin throw, long jump, shot put, and baseball throw), earning enough points to take the team title.

Didrikson also played basketball on the women's All-America team from 1930-1932, winning one championship. She set the Guinness World Record for longest baseball throw (female) in 1931 at 296 feet. In 1934, she played baseball on a barnstorming team for the House of David (reportedly paid \$1,000 a month), and she pitched in Major League Baseball spring training exhibition games.

Then Babe discovered golf, and after 1934, she played it almost exclusively, becoming the first female golf celebrity. She was the first woman to compete in a men's event in 1938. Didrikson went

back and forth as an amateur and pro, winning 56 major tournaments. In 1946 she won the U.S. Women's Amateur tournament, in 1947, she won 17 straight amateur golf championships. Sometimes brash, always confident, she was known to outdrive the men, reportedly saying, "You've got to loosen your girdle and really let the ball have it!" In 1948, she attempted to qualify for the U.S. Open, but was told it was only open to men. She was a founding member of the LPGA in 1950.

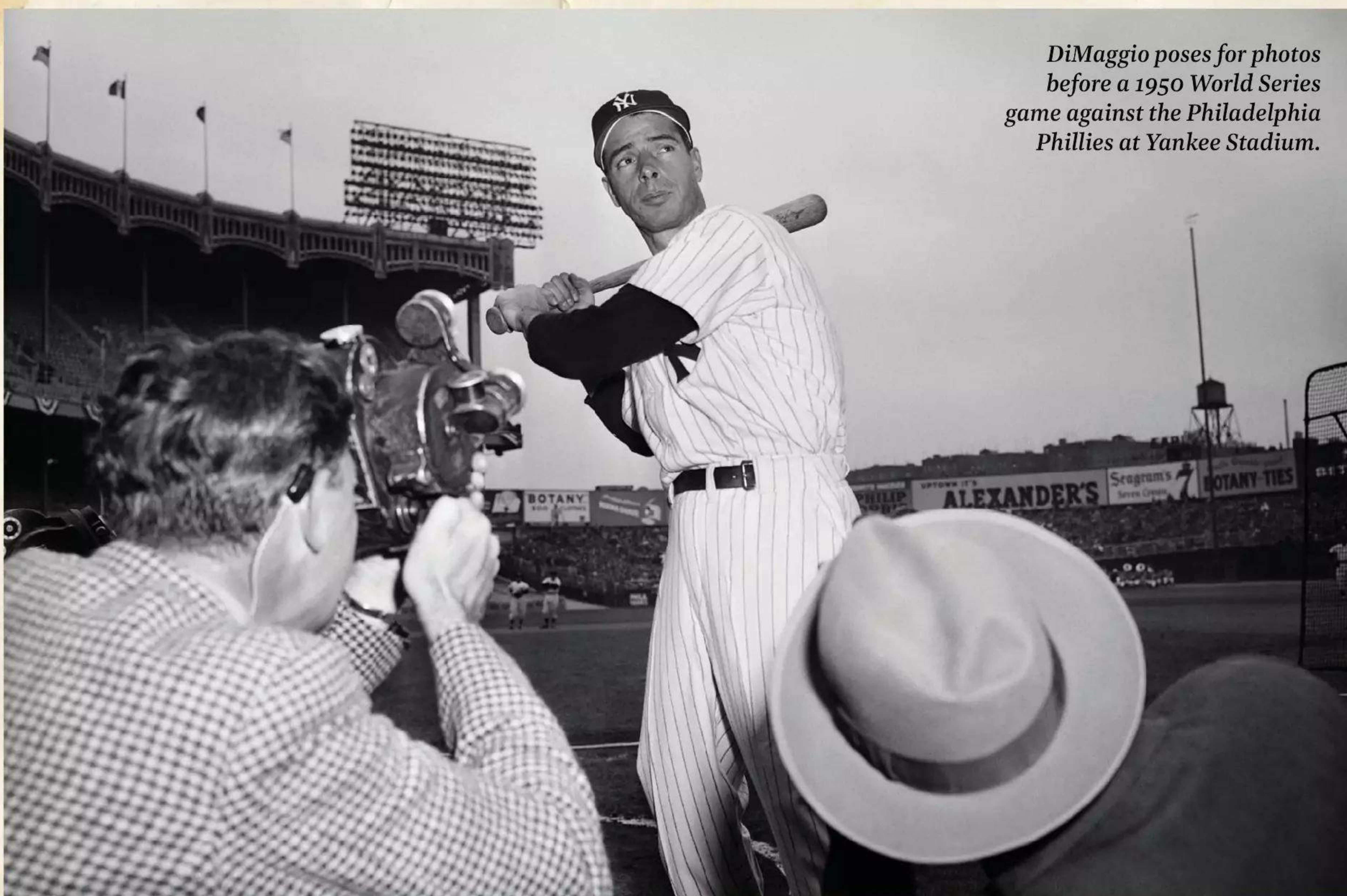
Ranked by many as the world's greatest female athlete of all time, Didrikson dabbled expertly in most sports she did not star in (including boxing, football, swimming, pool, and tennis), but at the time, she was not praised by all. She often faced harsh criticism for breaking with traditional ideals of femininity at the time.

From top left: Didrikson holds a javelin at the 1932 Olympic Games in Los Angeles; Didrikson winning the hurdles at the same Olympics. Didrikson pitching for the Philadelphia A's in a 1934 exhibition game against the Brooklyn Dodgers. Didrikson at the Women's Western Golf Tournament in 1940.

AWARDS & HONORS

AP Woman Athlete of the Century > No. 10 ESPN Greatest North American Athletes of the 20th Century > Bob Jones Award > U.S. Olympic Hall of Fame > LPGA Hall of Fame > National Women's Hall of Fame > Colorado Women's Hall of Fame > Presidential Medal of Freedom





DiMaggio poses for photos before a 1950 World Series game against the Philadelphia Phillies at Yankee Stadium.

JOE DIMAGGIO

/ BASEBALL

1914-1999 | Baseball's mythmaking machinery went into overdrive when it encountered Joe DiMaggio. Sportswriters for New York City's nearly dozen daily papers fell in love with the shy 21-year-old who came up with the Yankees from spring training in 1936. This handsome new kid, the son of a Sicilian immigrant fisherman, looked promising. His awkwardness and reticence with reporters was sometimes portrayed as enigmatic, as was his deadpan demeanor on the field. But the reports from his minor league stint with the San Francisco Seals were spot on. DiMaggio could "do it all"—hit, hit for power, run, field, and throw.

Whatever pressure the rookie felt from all these high expectations never showed on the diamond. He not only did it all, he did it with a stylishness that awed sportswriters and spectators alike. In 1936, he

received the most American League votes for the All-Star Game. That year, he and the Yankees cruised to the AL pennant, the team's first since 1932, and beat the rival New York Giants in the World Series. (During DiMaggio's 13 years as the Yankees' star player, they appeared in 10 World Series and won nine.) The defining event of his career occurred in 1941, when he got at least one base hit in 56 consecutive games—a record that still stands today.

DiMaggio's lifetime batting average (.325) was good, but not so high as those of his rough contemporaries Stan Musial (.331) and Ted Williams (.344). DiMaggio's career home runs (361) also trailed Musial's (475) and Williams' (521). But "Joltin' Joe" drove in more runs per game than either man and had far fewer strikeouts than any comparable slugger.

DiMaggio spent his entire career with the Yankees, retiring in 1951. After his retirement, he did the only thing that would attract more attention than his record-breaking hitting streak: He married Marilyn Monroe. —with Paul Gray

▶ AWARDS & HONORS 13-time All-Star ▶ AL MVP 1939, 1941, 1947 ▶ American Sportscasters Association Sports Legend Award ▶ Bob Feller Act of Valor Award ▶ Major League Baseball All-Century Team ▶ New York Yankees No. 5 retired ▶ National Baseball Hall of Fame

NOVAK DJOKOVIC

/TENNIS

B. 1987 | At the start of his run of titles in 2006, Novak Djokovic was the cocky upstart from Serbia who would crash the Roger Federer-Rafael Nadal rivalry. Djokovic forced the dominant Federer-Nadal duo to morph into a trio, and their fans never forgave him. But now that Federer is retired, and Nadal has said he expects 2024 to be his last year, some Djokovic haters have softened their stance. They have no choice but to admire his greatness.

Djokovic also earned many critics during the COVID-19 pandemic. When the ATP cancelled tournaments for 2020, Djokovic launched a mini-tour, and many participants tested positive for the virus. He also refused the vaccine, and was deported from Australia in 2022 and could not compete in the 2022 U.S. Open. Be that as it may, Djokovic has effected positive change through the Novak Djokovic Foundation, an organization he founded in 2007 to invest in early childhood development, especially in his native Serbia. As of 2024, the foundation has built or refurbished 58 schools.

Djokovic can do it all on the court, and is still fit and defying age. He won the U.S. Open at 36, the oldest man to do so; since the start of 2021, he's won 7 of the 10 major tournaments in which he's appeared. His career totals so far: a record 24 Grand Slam men's singles titles, including a record 10 Australian Open titles. He has 98 singles titles—24 majors, 40 Masters and a record 7 ATP finals. In singles, he is the only player to win a Triple Grand Slam and the only player to complete a career Golden Masters—twice. He is the only man in tennis history to have been the reigning champion of all four majors at one time across all three surfaces.

Next up: winning a 25th major and sole possession of the all-time mark. "I don't want to leave this sport if I'm still at the top," Djokovic said after winning the 2023 U.S. Open. We'll see what happens. —with Sean Gregory

▶ AWARDS & HONORS ATP No. 1 ranking record holder ▶ Eight-time ATP Player of the Year ▶ Eight-time ITF World Champion ▶ Arthur Ashe Humanitarian of the Year 2012 ▶ UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador



Djokovic celebrates a point against Roberto Carballés Baena during a singles match at the 2023 Australian Open.

DALE EARNHARDT

/AUTO RACING

1951-2001 | With an eighth-grade education, a push-broom mustache, and a from-the-gut driving style that earned him the nickname “The Intimidator,” Dale Earnhardt was as apt a face as any for a sport whose roots lie with Prohibition-era bootleggers who souped up their cars to outrun fat sheriffs on dusty roads, and he had a devilish grin to match anything Burt Reynolds flashed in *Smokey and the Bandit*.

But on February 18, 2001, in the last lap of the first and biggest race of the 2001 NASCAR season, the sport’s greatest driver got tangled up with another car and slammed his trademark No. 3 black Chevrolet into the wall at the Daytona International Speedway. Earnhardt, 49, was killed instantly.

Part of Earnhardt’s legend is that he once crawled out of an ambulance and limped back to his mangled car after learning it was still driveable. This time he hit the wall and didn’t move. For racing fans, his death was an almost unimaginable tragedy.

Hailing from Kannapolis, North Carolina, Earnhardt was a good ol’ boy who made good,

earning \$41 million and starting a business, Dale Earnhardt Inc., that owned the cars that won four Drivers’ Championships and 95 races. Earnhardt’s driving style ruffled plenty of feathers, but in 1998, when he won his only Daytona 500 on his 20th try, someone from nearly every Winston Cup crew in the infield reached out to slap his hand as he drove toward victory lane.

For racing, Earnhardt was the grandstands, the blue-collar throngs that fill them week in and week out, leaving rivers of spilt beer and spit tobacco in their wake. —with Frank Pellegrini

▶ **AWARDS & HONORS** Seven-time Winston Cup Series Champion ▶ Coca-Cola 600 winner 1986, 1992, 1993 ▶ Southern 500 winner 1987, 1989, 1990 ▶ Daytona 500 winner 1998 ▶ Winston 500 winner 1990, 1994, 1999, 2000 ▶ Brickyard 400 winner 1994 ▶ NASCAR’s 50 Greatest Drivers 1998 ▶ Winston Cup Series Most Popular Driver 2001 ▶ Motorsports Hall of Fame ▶ International Motorsports Hall of Fame ▶ NASCAR Hall of Fame

Earnhardt waits while his car is repaired after a crash at the 1981 Firecracker 400 in Daytona Beach.





Federer kisses the Gentleman's Singles Trophy after winning Wimbledon in 2017.

ROGER FEDERER

/TENNIS

B. 1981 | Anyone who lived through Roger Federer's apex was fortunate to witness it. From 2004 through 2007, the four consecutive calendar years he ended his campaign as No. 1 in the world, Federer won 93% of his tennis matches. In 2004 and 2005, he reached the finals in 23 tournaments. He won 22—or 96%—of them.

“He’s a once-in-a-lifetime type athlete, in any sport. When it’s all said and done, we’re going to be celebrating Roger like we celebrate Michael Jordan,” Justin Gimelstob, a former Tennis Channel analyst and tour player, told TIME in 2017.

But unlike Jordan or other supremely driven stars like Kobe Bryant and Tiger Woods, Federer never sacrificed decorum on the altar of success. Jordan and Bryant, for example, were notoriously rough on less-talented teammates; Jordan once slugged Steve Kerr in the face at a practice. Woods in his heyday was known to bring an Arctic chill to major tournaments.

Federer's fellow players, however, have selected him winner of the Stefan Edberg Sportsmanship Award 13 times since 2004. “I’ve been in a lot of

rooms and been around a lot of people,” said tennis star Andre Agassi. “There’s a lot to be said for those rare people who you meet that, when you speak to them, nobody else in the room exists. There’s a generosity of spirit with Roger that anyone would want to emulate.”

Federer's physical skills have tended to obscure just how resilient he has been throughout his career—a point not lost on him. “My mental toughness has always been overshadowed by my virtuosity, my shotmaking, my technique, my grace,” Federer told TIME. “That’s why when I lose, it seems like, ‘Oh, he didn’t play so well.’ And when I win, it looks so easy.” —with Sean Gregory

🎬 **AWARDS & HONORS** 20-time Singles Grand Slam Winner > Olympic Gold Medalist 2008 (Doubles) > Five-time ATP Player of the Year > Five-time ITF World Champion > Five-time Laureus World Sportsman of the Year > Four-time BBC World Sport Star of the Year > Arthur Ashe Humanitarian Award 2006, 2013 > TIME 100 Most Influential People 2018

GEORGE FOREMAN

/BOXING

B. 1949 | He might not have been one of the greatest boxers of all time, but George Foreman—for railing against the crushing inevitability of age—deserves some recognition. After retiring from the sport as a rather grizzled bruiser in the 1970s, the lovable heavyweight—and there’s a sporting oxymoron if ever there was one—got back into the ring a decade later, claiming that his primary motive was to raise money to fund his youth center. He was 38. (Foreman had become a successful entrepreneur during his time off, as buyers of his famous George Foreman grills can attest).

Critics snickered that the only opponent he could knock out would need to be hooked to a respirator. Although he looked out of shape, Foreman beat Steve Zouski by KO in four rounds in that 1987 comeback fight, worked on his fitness, and staged an astonishing comeback. “Forty is no death sentence,” Foreman told *TIME* in 1989, “age is only a problem if you make it one.”

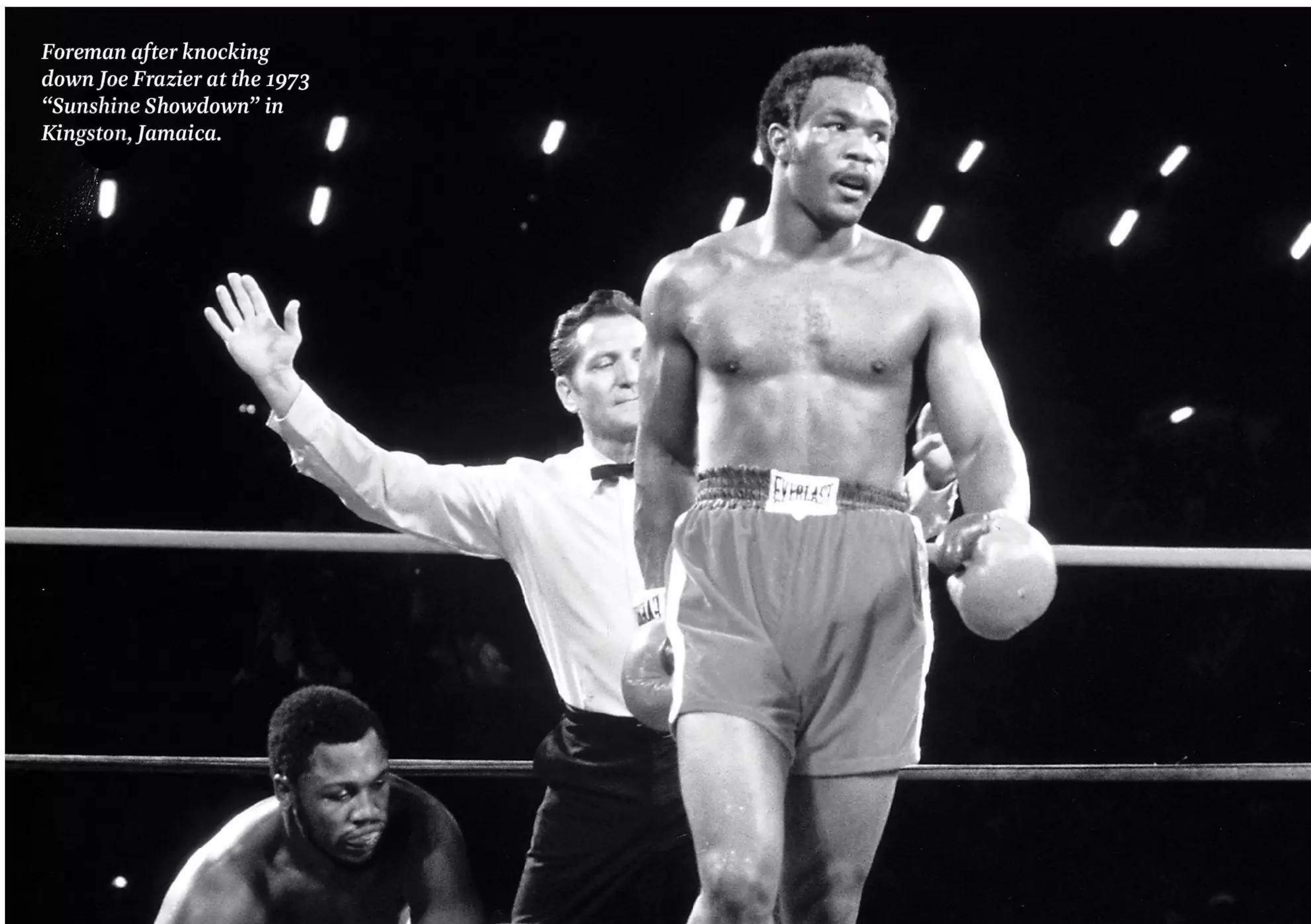
In 1994, at 45, Foreman took on Michael Moorer. Wearing the same pair of red trunks he had donned for his defeat of Muhammad Ali in 1974, he knocked out Moorer with a trademark jab in the 10th to capture the IBF and WBA titles. As Foreman knelt in prayer, the crowd cheered the oldest man to ever win a world heavyweight crown, who had just broken the record for the longest interval between one world championship and the next.

Foreman was born into poverty and had a troubled childhood. At 16, he cleaned up his act and joined Job Corps, where one of his counselors was a boxing coach who encouraged Foreman to learn the sport. Foreman left the ring in 1977, became a born-again Christian, and was ordained a minister in 1978. In 1984, he founded the George Foreman Youth and Community Center, a non-denominational place to help kids who need direction like he once did.
—with Belinda Luscombe

AWARDS & HONORS

Heavyweight Champion
1973, 1994 > 76 wins
in 81 fights (68 KOs)
> Olympic Gold Medal
1968 > American Legion
James V. Day “Good
Guy” Award 2013 > U.S.
Olympic Hall of Fame >
World Boxing Hall of
Fame > International
Boxing Hall of Fame

*Foreman after knocking
down Joe Frazier at the 1973
“Sunshine Showdown” in
Kingston, Jamaica.*





Foyt drinking champagne after one of his four Pocono 500 wins.

A.J. FOYT

/AUTO RACING

B. 1935 | Fast cars were nothing new to A.J. Foyt: He practically cut his teeth on a camshaft. The son of a Houston garage owner, Foyt won his first auto race at the age of 4—in a scaled-down midget with a one-cylinder engine and a top speed of 18 mph. He quit school at 17 to turn pro, fought his way up from the dirt tracks of the Southwest to the big time and the big money at Milwaukee and Trenton and Indianapolis. In 1960 he won his first (of seven) United States Auto Club championships; a year later, he won the Indy 500.

Foyt would go on to drive in 34 more consecutive Indy 500s, winning it three more times—he was the first driver to win it four times. He holds records for most USAC wins (159) and Indy car career wins (67). He is the only driver to have won the Indianapolis 500, the 24 Hours of Le Mans, the Daytona 500, and the 24 Hours of Daytona.

As the owner of A.J. Foyt Racing, Foyt has also seen the winner's circle as an owner. In 2022 and 2023, A.J. Foyt Racing's ABC Supply-sponsored car was painted in a patriotic theme for the Indy 500 to help generate donations for Homes for Our Troops, a nonprofit that builds and donates specially adapted custom homes for severely injured post-9/11 veterans. They raised \$2 million for the cause in 2022 and \$3 million in 2023.

▶ AWARDS & HONORS Texas Sports Hall of Fame ▶ Auto Racing Hall of Fame ▶ National Midget Auto Racing Hall of Fame ▶ Motorsports Hall of Fame of America ▶ National Sprint Car Hall of Fame ▶ International Motorsports Hall of Fame ▶ Automotive Hall of Fame ▶ USAC Hall of Fame ▶ Sebring Hall of Fame ▶ Houston Sports Hall of Fame



Frazier poses during a workout before his 1968 NYSAC title bout with Buster Mathis at Madison Square Garden.

JOE FRAZIER

/BOXING

1944-2011 | Joe Frazier won't go down in history as the greatest fighter of all time. Muhammad Ali, the man with whom Frazier sparred so epically, both inside and outside the ropes, owns that distinction. Frazier's role in Ali's legacy will always define his own: it's impossible to mention "Smokin' Joe" without summoning Ali a few seconds later.

But if Ali defined Frazier, well, Frazier made Ali too. If not for Frazier's greatness—his left hook crumbled opponents; he defended his heavyweight title four times from 1970 to 1973—Ali could never have been called the Greatest. But at times Frazier was the bigger man.

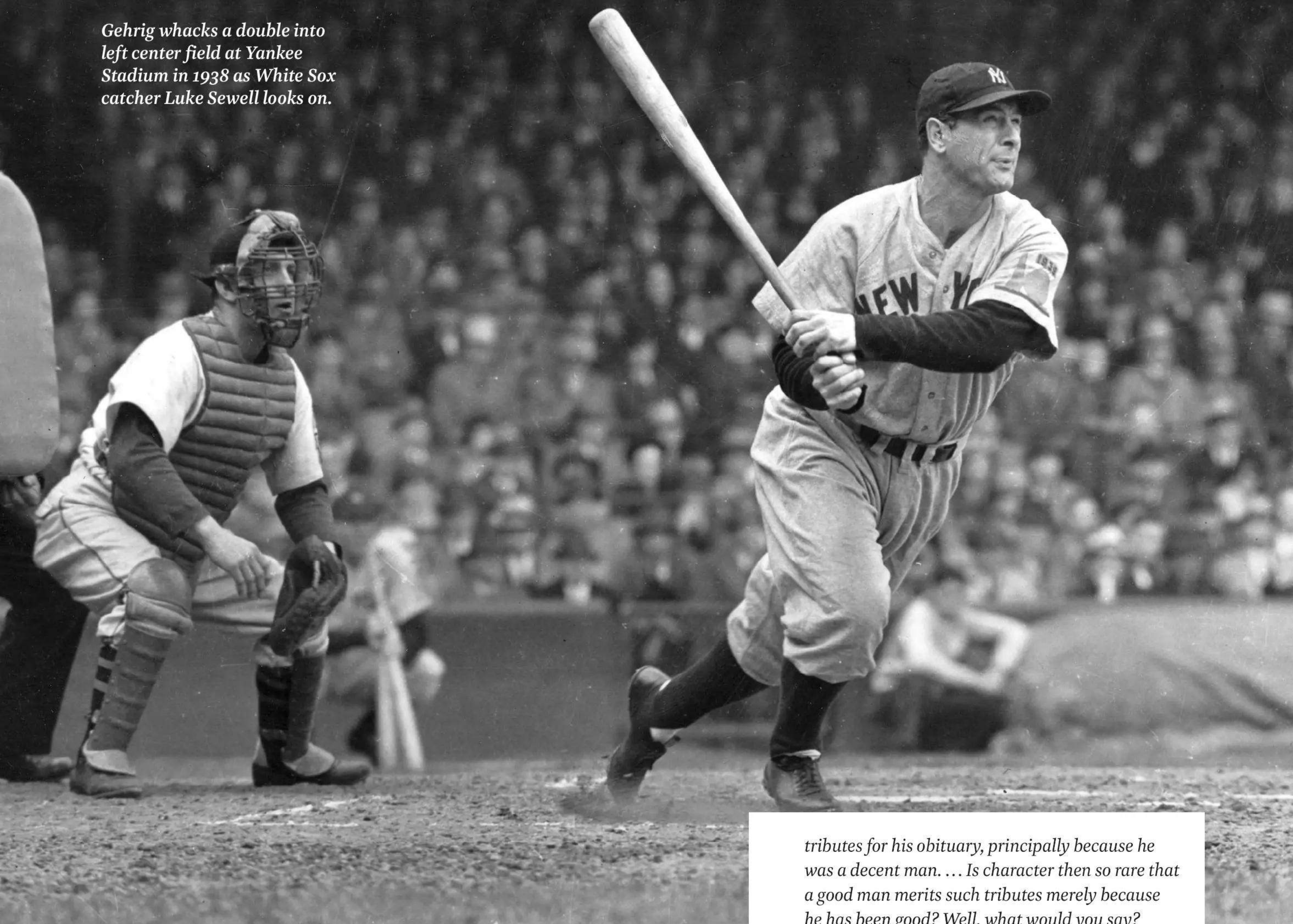
Ali feared Frazier, and that insecurity brought out the worst in him. During the height of their rivalry in the racially charged 1970s, Ali accused Frazier of being an Uncle Tom whenever he could. Frazier rarely rose to Ali's bait. "Ali can't touch me," Frazier once said, "in ability or decency."

Joe Frazier grew up in Beaufort, South Carolina, where he was raised in a four-room shack on a farm, the 12th of 13 children. He threw his first punches against a feed bag stuffed with rags, hung from an oak tree. Frazier told his siblings he'd be the next Joe Louis. "I'd hit that heavy bag for an hour at a time," he once said. "I'd wrap my hands with a necktie of my Daddy's, or a stocking of my Momma's or sister's, and get to it."

Ali portrayed Frazier as some sort of puppet of the white man, but in truth, Jim Crow sent him fleeing from South Carolina. A teenage Frazier hitchhiked to Charleston, or as he put it, "caught the first thing smokin' that was goin' north." He settled in Philadelphia, where a fight manager discovered him. He lost only one of his amateur fights and won a gold medal at the 1964 Olympics before going pro in 1965. —with Sean Gregory

▶ AWARDS & HONORS 32 wins in 37 fights (27 KOs) ▶ Olympic Gold Medal 1964 ▶ NYSAC Heavyweight Title 1968-1973 ▶ *The Ring* Fighter of the Year 1967, 1970, 1971 ▶ Boxing Writers of America Fighter of the Year 1969, 1971, 1975 ▶ U.S. Olympic Hall of Fame ▶ World Boxing Hall of Fame ▶ International Boxing Hall of Fame

Gehrig whacks a double into left center field at Yankee Stadium in 1938 as White Sox catcher Luke Sewell looks on.



LOU GEHRIG

/BASEBALL

1903-1941 | In 1941, when the news broke that Yankee great Lou Gehrig died of ALS at age 37, flags were lowered to half-staff at ballparks across the country. At New York's Polo Grounds, Brooklyn's Ebbets Field, and Detroit's Briggs Stadium—where New York ball clubs were playing—the fans stood for a minute of silent tribute. In baseball's Hall of Fame, mourners filed past a black-draped plaque.

The emotional flood was the likes of which few old-timers could remember. Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Westbrook Pegler wrote in the *New York World-Telegram*:

"Lou Gehrig, when he came to die, was given miles of white paper covered with the tenderest

tributes for his obituary, principally because he was a decent man. ... Is character then so rare that a good man merits such tributes merely because he has been good? Well, what would you say?

The Lou Gehrigs should not be rare. They should be the standard human type, for, after all, Lou was a simple soul, with no affectations, who didn't have to work at being good and kind. He didn't even have a formula but just lived by ear, so to speak. ...

And here I am too, still fumbling in an attempt to find words with which to appreciate a man and a player, and coming to the end of the piece with nothing better to offer than something about character. That was what it was that made Gehrig great above and beyond his size and achievements, and it is no credit to the breed that so many of us are so unlike this fine man that we must stand in such awe of his simple virtues."

Gehrig played 17 seasons as a first baseman with the New York Yankees. He was an All-Star seven consecutive times, a Triple Crown winner, an AL MVP twice, and was a member of six World Series championship teams. He was the first MLB player to have his Yankee uniform, No. 4, retired by a team.

► **AWARDS & HONORS** AL home run leader 1931, 1934, 1936 ► Five-time AL RBI Leader ► Major League Baseball All-Century Team ► Major League Baseball All-Time Team ► Baseball Hall of Fame

STEFFI GRAF

/TENNIS

B. 1969 | Steffi Graf's father, a car-insurance salesman from Brühl, Germany, taught her how to swing a racket in their living room when she turned 3. She never stopped. Although Martina Navratilova and Chris Evert hit the ball hard, Graf brought new explosiveness to the game: Her forehand remains one of the greatest shots in women's tennis.

She contested 31 Grand Slam singles finals and won 22 of them (with at least four titles at each Grand Slam tournament). In 1988, she completed the calendar-year Grand Slam by winning all four majors, and walked away at age 19 with an Olympic gold medal to boot. An enigmatic champion, she let her racket do the talking, and still remains mysterious as a result.

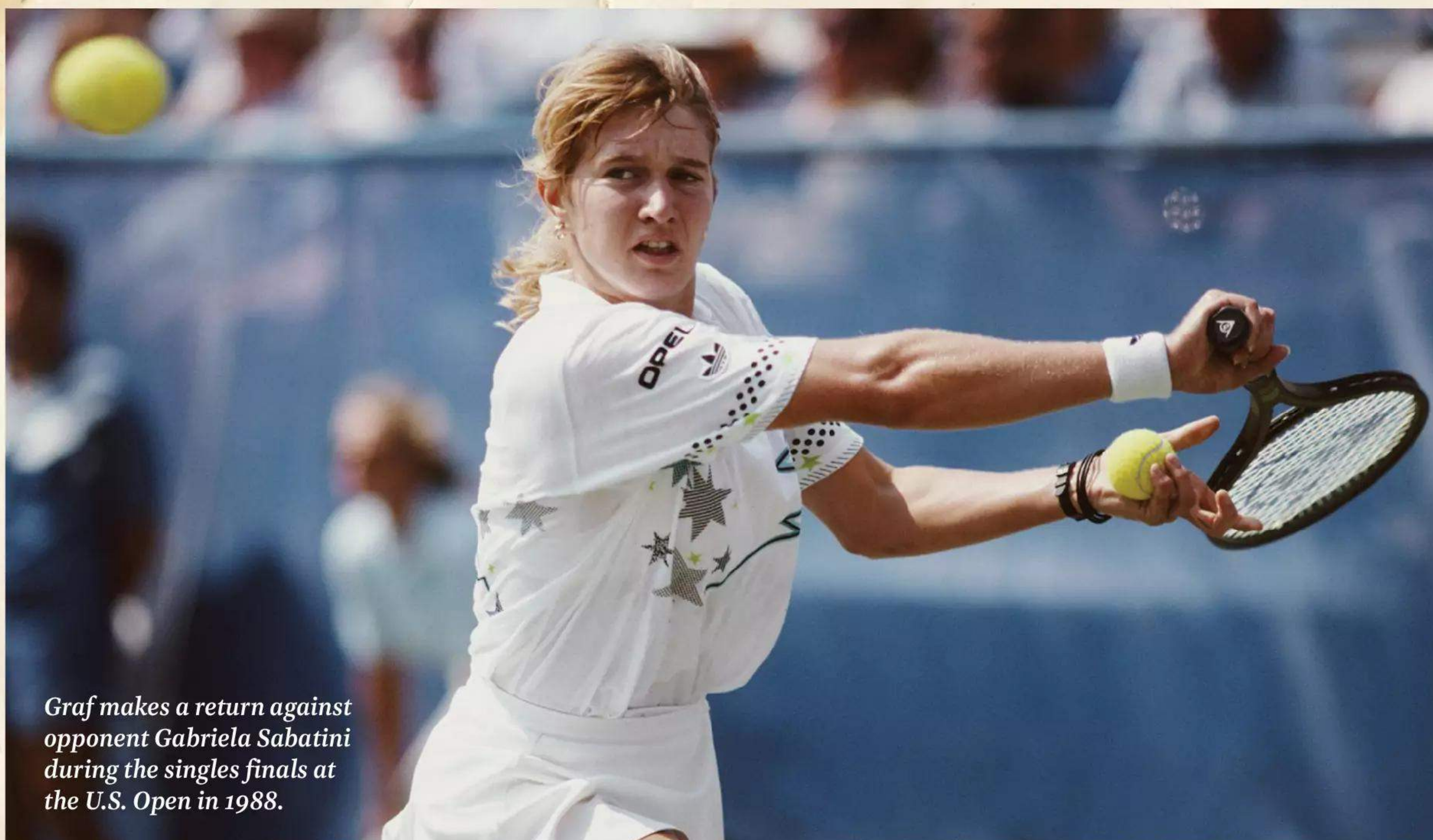
The finals of Graf's last French Open against teenager Martina Hingis in 1999 contained as much

drama as any in her glorious career. Where to begin? The favored Hingis disputing a line call in the second set (she had won the first) and venturing over to Graf's side of the court to point where she felt the ball had landed? The 32-stroke rally won by Graf in the second set as Hingis tried to serve out for the match? Perhaps the lengthy bathroom break Hingis took during the third set (when you've got to go, you've got to go)? Or maybe Hingis leaving the court after losing 4-6, 7-5, 6-2 and having to be persuaded to return for the presentation ceremony by her mother? In the words of the more reserved Graf, then 30: "It was one of the craziest matches ever. I don't know what else could have happened." Graf retired the same year.

Reflecting on her career, Graf told TIME in 2011, "Although the achievement of all four Grand Slam titles and an Olympic gold medal in 1988 stands out as my greatest accomplishment in tennis, my life with the family and watching the kids grow gives me greater joy than my tennis achievements."

—with William Lee Adams and Glen Levy

▶ AWARDS & HONORS Seven-time Wimbledon Champion ▶ Six-time French Open Champion ▶ Five-time U.S. Open Champion ▶ Australian Open Champion 1988, 1989, 1990, 1994 ▶ Seven-time ITF World Champion ▶ Eight-time WTA Player of the Year ▶ BBC World Sport Star of the Year 1988 ▶ International Tennis Hall of Fame ▶ German Sports Hall of Fame ▶ Jean Borotra Sportsmanship Award



Graf makes a return against opponent Gabriela Sabatini during the singles finals at the U.S. Open in 1988.

WAYNE GRETZKY

/HOCKEY

B. 1961 | If you grew up in a hockey house, you might have worshipped Wayne Gretzky as if he were the Messiah on Skates. And in a lot of ways, he was: The Great One played a full two decades of NHL-level hockey, starting in 1979 with the Edmonton Oilers and ending with the New York Rangers, just before the turn of the century, racking up some 2,857 points in 1,487 regular season games. (NHL scoring gives individual players one point for a goal and one point for an assist.)

Those 2,857 points made him—and still makes him—the League’s leading scorer. Gretzky toppled another hockey legend, Gordie Howe (1,850 points), to first take that title, on October 15, 1989—almost 35 years ago.

Gretzky’s points total is impressive to say the least. But this stat feels even more surprising: Subtracting his goal points from his 2,857 total leaves Gretzky with more career assists—1,963—than any other player has total points.

That fact instills a simple lesson for hockey fans: Greatness can sometimes come from being the guy who puts the puck in the back of the net. But more often, it comes from knowing who you can count on to get that job done better in any given moment. “How long Gretzky and [NBA star Larry] Bird play at the top and stay at the fair will help determine their ultimate reputations,” *TIME* wrote of Gretzky in a 1985 cover story about athletes at the peaks of their careers.

He stayed at the top for many seasons after that, but more than three decades later, his playing legacy is this: While being the hero scorer of the game is nice, you don’t always have to shoot. Sometimes it’s smarter to pass. —with Alex Fitzpatrick

► AWARDS & HONORS Four-time Stanley Cup Winner > 58 NHL Records > Nine Hart Trophies > 10 Art Ross Trophies > Conn Smythe Trophy 1985, 1988 > Five Lester B. Pearson Awards > Five Lady Byng Trophies > Hockey Hall of Fame > World Hockey Association Hall of Fame > IIHF Hall of Fame > Order of Hockey in Canada > Canada’s Walk of Fame



Gretzky hoisting the Stanley Cup after the Edmonton Oilers beat the Philadelphia Flyers in Game 7 of the 1987 Stanley Cup Finals.



Hamilton celebrates his win in parc fermé at the 2019 United States Grand Prix in Austin.

LEWIS HAMILTON

/AUTO RACING

B. 1985 | The son of mixed-race parents, Lewis Hamilton became the first Black driver (and as of 2023, the only Black driver) in Formula One after growing up in public housing north of London, rather than being groomed in the gilded garages that typically breed championship drivers. Since winning his first title in 2008 at just 23, Hamilton has become as much of a celebrity off the track—he's a Fashion Week regular whose Instagram feed is filled with shots of him chumming with A-listers. He's recorded hip-hop songs and had a role in "Call of Duty." "He's an ambassador for Formula One," said Christian Horner, head of the rival Red Bull Racing Team. "He takes it to places where you wouldn't normally see it, particularly in the U.S."

There is no doubt Hamilton's popularity stoked profits at Formula One. Since his rookie season in 2007, the sport's annual global revenue rose 53%, to \$1.83 billion in July 2016, and in 2022, total revenue was \$2.57 billion.

In 2007, Hamilton, then 21, secured his spot in Formula One, where he turned in one of the greatest rookie seasons ever, losing the championship by a single point. He won the title in 2008. Two years later, after finishing fifth, Hamilton fired his father as his manager, a difficult move but one Hamilton

thought was necessary. The following two seasons were rough, with Hamilton matching his career-worst fifth-place finish in 2011. He switched teams, from McLaren to Mercedes, for the 2013 season before taking the 2014 and 2015 world titles and finishing a close second in 2016. After rival teammate Nico Rosberg's surprise retirement in 2016, Hamilton went on to win four straight titles. In 2021, he became the first driver to surpass 100 pole positions and 100 race wins, respectively. The year 2022 brought several podiums, but no wins, and in 2023 he beat the record for most pole positions at a single circuit (104). Hamilton will part ways with Mercedes at the end of the 2024 season. He joins the Ferrari team in 2025. —with Sean Gregory

▶ AWARDS & HONORS Seven F1 Championships ▶ 103 wins, 197 podiums ▶ Laureus World Sports Award for Breakthrough of the Year 2008 ▶ FIA Personality of the Year 2014, 2018, 2020, 2021 ▶ Seven AS International Racing Driver Awards ▶ AS Rookie of the Year 2006, 2007 ▶ FIA Action of the Year 2022 ▶ Laureus World Sports Sportsman of the Year 2020 ▶ TIME 100 Most Influential People 2016, 2020

MIA HAMM

/SOCCER

B. 1972 | Mia Hamm has been a role model for girls since she established herself as one of the greatest female athletes of all time. Hamm held the record for most international goals scored by a soccer player—male or female—from 2004 until 2013. She won FIFA world player of the year twice, and won gold at the 1996 and 2004 Olympics.

In 1987, at age 15, Hamm joined the U.S. women's national soccer team. They captured World Cups in China in 1991 and in the U.S. in 1999. Over 17 million Americans tuned in to see the U.S. beat China in the final, setting a record for the largest U.S. television audience for a soccer match. Between 1989 and 1994, she helped the University of North Carolina Tar Heels win four NCAA Division 1 championships. In 2001, Hamm became the face of the Women's United Soccer Association, the first pro women's soccer league in the U.S. She played for the Washington Freedom from 2001-'03, and was the star of the league. Hamm retired from play in 2004, but she is still active in soccer as co-owner of the Los Angeles FC and Angel City FC.

When asked by TIME's Eliana Dockterman in 2014 about whether she knew she had powerful role-model status when she did the iconic 1999 "Anything You Can Do I Can Do Better" Gatorade commercial with Michael Jordan, she said, "Definitely. I took every opportunity as a responsibility to not only help our sport grow but also to support female athletics. I felt it was important."

▶ AWARDS & HONORS Five-time U.S. Soccer Female Athlete of the Year ▶ Women's Sports Foundation Sportswoman of the Year 1997, 1999 ▶ ESPY Best Female Athlete 1998, 2000 ▶ ESPY Outstanding Soccer Performer of the Year 2000, 2001, 2005 ▶ FIFA World Player of the Year 2001, 2002 ▶ ESPY Best Female Soccer Player 2004 ▶ FIFA 100 ▶ ESPN Greatest Female Athlete 2012 ▶ National Soccer Hall of Fame ▶ World Football Hall of Fame ▶ USWNT All-Time Best XI ▶ Golden Foot Award ▶ National Women's Hall of Fame

Hamm breaks upfield during the quarterfinals of the 2003 FIFA Women's World Cup in Foxboro, Massachusetts.





Henie, age 11, skating at the first Olympic Winter Games in Chamonix, France, in 1924.

SONJA HENIE

/FIGURE SKATING

1912-1969 | At about the same time Babe Ruth was knocking 'em over the fence and Jack Dempsey was knocking opponents out, Sonja Henie was busy transforming figure skating. Before Henie, the sport was a dull display of skill exercises—by incorporating ballet choreography and glamor, Henie turned it into the spectacular exhibition we know today. Henie was the first figure skater to wear skirts above the knee and chose to don white boots, which elongated the leg and provided a more pleasing focal point for judges and spectators. Other skaters quickly followed suit. Today, we can't imagine figure skating without the glitzy outfits.

During her reign as amateur queen of the ice, Henie won the world championship 10 consecutive

times, an unequaled record. She also won six European championships and three Olympic golds—1928, 1932, and 1936.

She gave up her amateur status in 1936 and began performing in live ice shows across Europe and America, popularizing the sport and giving other skaters opportunities to make a living. Despite her success on the ice, Henie had always dreamed of being a Hollywood star, and Hollywood was more than happy to cash in on her fame. She signed a long-term deal with 20th Century Fox in 1936 and made 10 popular films, many of which featured her skating. She was one of the leading draws to the box office in the late '30s and early '40s. Henie secured numerous product endorsement deals and amassed a great deal of personal wealth, becoming one of the highest-earning self-made women of her time.

Her wealth gave her the opportunity to collect modern art, which she loved. In 1968, she opened the Henie Onstad Art Centre near Oslo. Today, the collection consists of more than 8,000 works.

▶ AWARDS & HONORS World Figure Skating Hall of Fame ▶ International Women's Sports Hall of Fame ▶ Hollywood Walk of Fame ▶ Knight First Class of The Royal Norwegian Order of St. Olav

GORDIE HOWE

/HOCKEY

1928-2016 | They didn't call Canada native Gordie Howe "Mr. Hockey" for nothing. Like his career, his comeback story is one for the record books.

Act I of Howe's career began with the Detroit Red Wings back in 1946. He spent 25 seasons in Detroit, where he won the Art Ross trophy for leading the league in points six times between 1950 and 1963. He won four Stanley Cups with the Red Wings and six Hart Trophies, hockey's MVP honor. He retired from the Red Wings in 1971 and was inducted into the Hockey Hall of Fame in 1972.

Now comes Act II: After two years in a front-office job with the Red Wings, he signed with the World Hockey Association's Houston Aeros in 1973 (playing alongside his sons, Mark and Marty) before moving to another then-WHA club, the Hartford Whalers. When the Whalers joined the National Hockey League, he found himself skating with the big boys again at age 51, retiring again the following year.

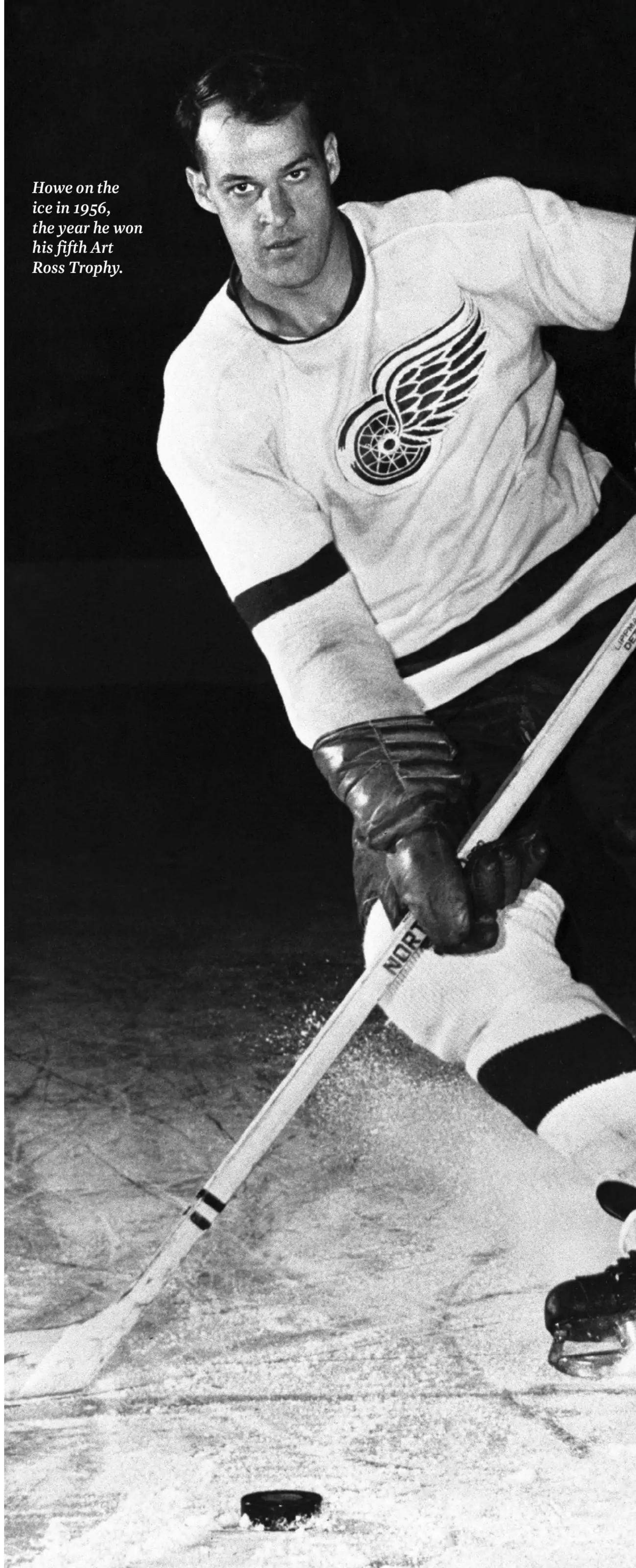
But retirement number two doesn't quite close the book on Mr. Hockey: Remarkably, on October 3, 1997, he took to the ice (at almost 70 years old) for Act III and one final shift with the Detroit Vipers of the International Hockey League. Howe is the only hockey player to play in a professional game over six consecutive decades.

Howe holds numerous NHL records in games played, and he held records in goals, assists, and total points until they were broken by Wayne Gretzky. Howe also played in a record 23 NHL All-Star Games.

The "Gordie Howe Hat Trick" of hockey fan parlance is a variation on the classic hat trick: the Howe version is when a player collects a goal, an assist, and a fight in the same game. Although Howe was feared as one of the toughest of the tough guys, he only accomplished his hat trick twice during his epic career. —with Glen Levy

▶ AWARDS & HONORS Officer of the Order of Canada ▶ Canadian Versions of the Queen Elizabeth II Silver, Gold, and Diamond Jubilee Medals ▶ Wayne Gretzky International Award ▶ NHL Lifetime Achievement Award ▶ Canada's Sports Hall of Fame

Howe on the ice in 1956, the year he won his fifth Art Ross Trophy.





SABRINA IONESCU

/BASKETBALL

B. 1997 | When Sabrina Ionescu was in middle school, she wanted to play basketball, but there weren't enough female players to start a team. "My middle school said I should be playing with dolls. Seriously, word-for-word," she told the *Washington Post* in 2019. So Ionescu formed her own team instead. Her tenacity would pay off.

Born to Romanian immigrants in California, Ionescu finished her high school career with a win-loss record of 119-9 and a record 2,606 points. Her senior year, she was named *USA Today* Girls Basketball Player of the Year, Max Preps Player of the Year, Cal-Hi Sports Ms. Basketball State Player of the Year, Gatorade State Player of the Year, and was named MVP of the McDonald's All American Game. She was the No. 1 ranked point guard in the 2016 recruiting class.

As a college freshman at the University of Oregon, she was selected for the First Team All-Pac-12 (unanimous) and the Pac-12 All-Freshman Team and was named Pac-12 Freshman of the Year. Her sophomore year, she led the Ducks to their first No. 1 seed in the Pac-12 Women's Basketball Tournament and their third conference title, leading the division in scoring and assists. She was named Pac-12 Conference Women's Basketball Player of the Year, received the Nancy Lieberman Award, and was named a first-team All-American by ESPN. The Ducks made it to their first Final Four tournament

Ionescu handles the ball in a game against the Phoenix Mercury in 2022.



her junior year, and she won the John R. Wooden Award and the Wade Trophy. Despite being eligible for the WNBA draft, she decided to play out her senior season, winning the Honda Sports Award, the Wooden Award, the Wade Trophy, and the Nancy Lieberman Award for the third time. She was also named AP Player of the Year, Naismith College Player of the Year, and USBWA National Player of the Year.

She finished her senior season at the University of Oregon as the all-time leader in career triple-doubles and the only NCAA Division 1 basketball player to record 2,000 points, 1,000 assists, and 1,000 rebounds in a career.

Ionescu was selected by the New York Liberty as the first overall pick in the 2020 WNBA draft. And she made history again: In July 2022, she racked up 31 points, 13 rebounds, and 10 assists, achieving the first 30-point triple-double in WNBA history.

► **AWARDS & HONORS** WNBA All-Star 2022, 2023 ► All-WNBA Second Team 2022, 2023 ► WNBA Three-Point Shootout Champion 2023 ► WNBA Skills Challenge Champion 2022 ► WNBA Commissioner's Cup Champion 2023



James gestures in the first half of the West semifinal of the 2023 NBA In-Season Tournament. Inset: James before Game 5 of the 2009 NBA Eastern Conference Finals.



LEBRON JAMES

/BASKETBALL

B. 1984 | After nearly two decades in the NBA, LeBron James has fully embraced that his talent on the court is a means to achieving something greater off it. In 2020, when we needed it most, he showed why he is unrivaled in both. Despite misgivings, James played on in the bubble and led the Los Angeles Lakers to the NBA championship—his first with the team and fourth overall. By staying, James increased his leverage and influence, and got deep-pocketed owners, fellow athletes, and fans the world over to engage directly with democracy. And through it all, he spoke personally to the anguish of Black Americans, channeling the pain and outrage that exploded onto the streets into a plan of action.

In June of 2020, James launched the nonprofit More Than a Vote as a means to attract more people to the polls. By August, nearly 50 athletes, entertainers, and media figures had signed on as founding members. Less than five months after its founding, More Than a Vote members helped recruit more than 40,000 election workers nationally, particularly in places like Atlanta, Milwaukee,

Detroit, and Philadelphia—cities that helped deliver key swing states to Joe Biden. It was the highest-profile example of the surge in activism that spread across the sports world in 2020.

“In the Black community, we always hear the notion of ‘We want to see change,’” James told TIME in 2020. “But we rarely actually go out and try to help and call for action, actually do it. So I can say that my Black people and my Black communities, they actually went out and said not only did they want change, they actually went out and did it.”

—with Sean Gregory

AWARDS & HONORS NBA Champion 2012, 2013, 2016, 2020 > NBA Finals MVP 2012, 2013, 2016, 2020 > NBA Most Valuable Player 2009, 2010, 2012, 2013 > 20-time NBA All-Star > NBA All-Star Game MVP 2006, 2008, 2018 > 13-time All-NBA First Team > NBA 75th Anniversary Team > Olympic Gold Medalist 2008, 2012 > TIME 100 Most Influential People 2005, 2013, 2017, 2019 > AP Athlete of the Decade 2010s > Sports Illustrated Sportsperson of the Year 2012, 2016, 2020 > AP Athlete of the Year 2013, 2016, 2018, 2020 > Jackie Robinson Award 2017 > NAACP President’s Award 2021

DAN JANSEN

/SPEED SKATING

B. 1965 | Ice is slippery, and speed-skating great Dan Jansen prefers it that way. The ice has been his friend and partner, providing him a surface upon which to set world records and achieve fame on ovals in the Netherlands, Canada, and the U.S. Beyond the land of the five-colored rings, he was recognized as a hero and the greatest sprinter on long blades in the 1980s and 1990s.

But Olympic gold eluded him. He was only 16 in 1984, when he placed fourth in the 500 meters. In Calgary in 1988, he learned of the death of his beloved sister, Jane, the day he was to race the 500 meters and 1,000 meters. He fell in both races. In Albertville 1992, he finished fourth in the 500 meters and 26th in the 1,000 meters. After setting the world record in the 1994 World Sprint Speedskating Championships in the 500 meters, he was considered a lock for Olympic gold in the same event at the Lillehammer games. But he finished a heartbreaking eighth.

At his last-ever Olympic event, the 1,000 meters, seven competitors had better times than Jansen's

career best. And the surface did not feel right to him. "I wasn't gripping the ice well in the warm-up," he told TIME. But Jansen knew he had to skate three-tenths of a second faster than he had ever skated just to have a chance. After a teeter around the 600-meter mark, he rounded the final turn, and 10,000 spectators held their breath. They let it out when he hit the last straightaway flying. When Jansen crossed the finish line with a world record-setting time of 1 minute, 12.43 seconds, he finally earned his gold.

"Anybody who had doubts does not know racing," Jansen said. "They don't know Dan Jansen." Then he accepted his medal, shed several tears, and skated a victory lap holding his infant daughter, Jane, in his arms. Jansen was chosen by his teammates to carry the U.S. flag in the closing ceremonies.

Jansen retired from skating in 1994 and started the Dan Jansen Fund, which helps people affected by leukemia and related cancers and supports youth programs. —with Paul A. Witteman

AWARDS & HONORS

James E. Sullivan Award
1994 > U.S. Olympic Hall of Fame > Wisconsin Athletics Hall of Fame

Jansen skates the 500 meters at the 1992 Winter Olympic Games in Albertville, France.



Jeter salutes fans at his final game in Yankee Stadium in 2014.



DEREK JETER

/ BASEBALL

B. 1974 | Derek Jeter played 20 seasons for the New York Yankees, won five World Series rings, and had 3,461 hits—the sixth-best of all time, cementing him in the Hall of Fame.

In the years spanning Jeter's AL Rookie of the Year award and first World Series win in 1996 to Derek Jeter Day, a celebration of Jeter's retirement in 2014, Yankee fans adored him. His popularity extended past fans and teammates too. According to Q Scores Company, among active athletes recognized by more than half the U.S. population, Jeter owned the second-highest "Q score" in 2014—a general favorability rating—trailing only Peyton Manning. What's surprising: No other baseball player ranked in the top 15. "Baseball players aren't even on the national radar for the general population," Henry Schafer, an executive vice president at Q Scores told TIME shortly after Jeter's retirement. "They're just not out there like players from other sports."

But why Jeter?

For 20 years, no personal scandal interrupted the Jeter narrative: He was a winner, a leader, a guy who played the game "the right way"—a phrase that came

up often in the televised celebrity tributes that aired between innings at Jeter's last home game. Teammates, opponents, New York sports legends like Joe Namath, and big names outside of sports like Kenny Chesney offered their good wishes to the longtime Yankees shortstop. Former teammate Jorge Posada called Jeter the greatest Yankee of all time. Former NBA superstar Michael Jordan said Jeter is an "idol to me." Q Scores' Schafer observed, "He's pretty much the face of baseball. There's going to be a big void. It's going to be like when the NBA was trying to find the next Michael Jordan. Baseball is going to have a very tough time finding the next Derek Jeter." —with Sean Gregory

▶ AWARDS & HONORS 14-time MLB All-Star ▶ World Series MVP 2000 ▶ Five-time Gold Glove Winner ▶ Five-time Silver Slugger ▶ Babe Ruth Award 2000 ▶ Sporting News "Good Guy in Sports" Award 2002 ▶ AL Hank Aaron Award 2006, 2009 ▶ Sports Illustrated MLB All-Decade Team 2009 ▶ Lou Gehrig Memorial Award 2010 ▶ New York Yankees No. 2 retired



Johnson takes the ball down the court in the 1986-87 NBA Pacific Division finals in Los Angeles.

MAGIC JOHNSON

/BASKETBALL

B. 1959 | In 1979, point guard Earvin “Magic” Johnson led Michigan State to win the NCAA basketball championship over Indiana in front of 35.1 million TV viewers—the most watched college basketball game at the time. He was named Most Outstanding Player of the Final Four, then entered the 1979 NBA draft.

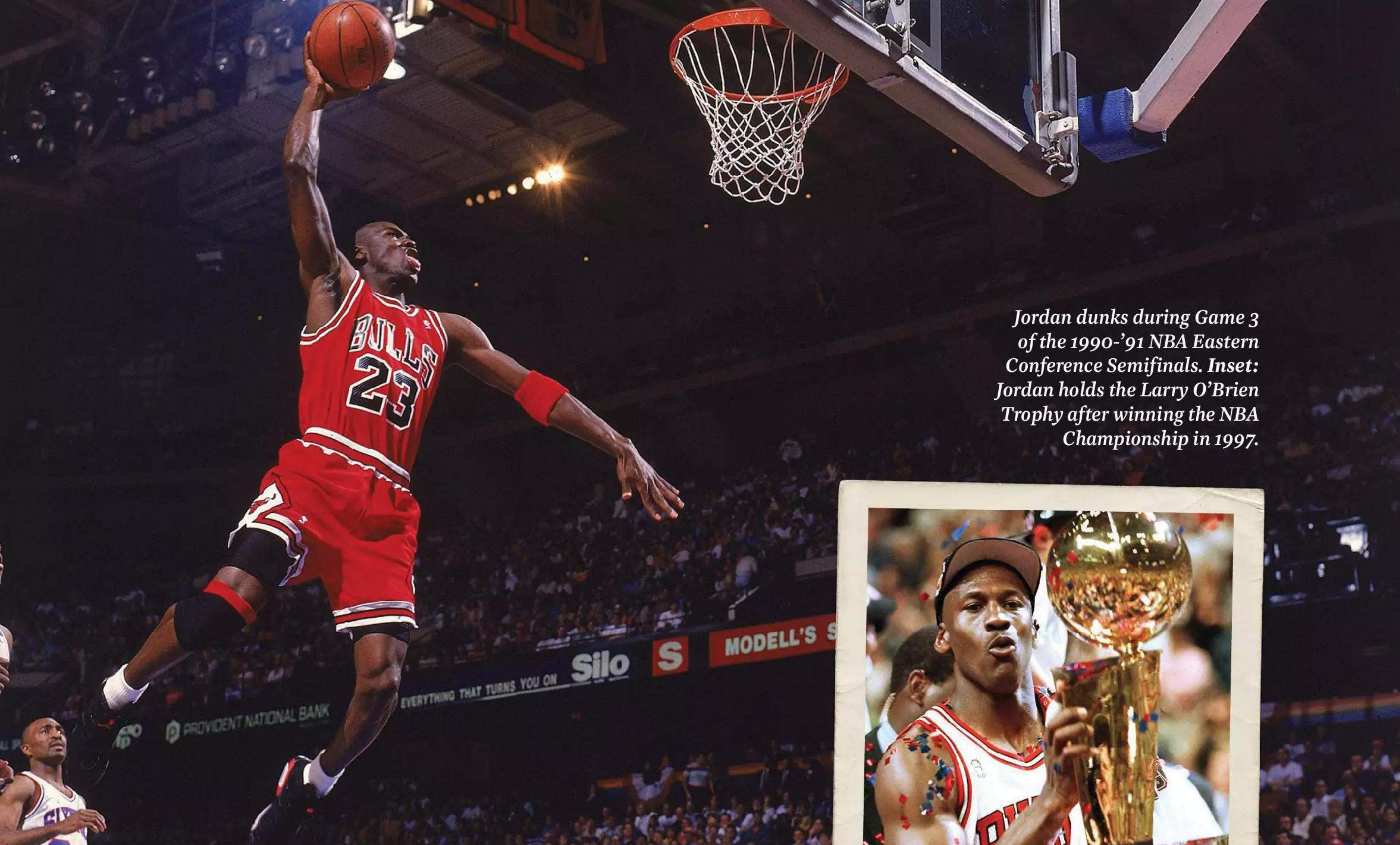
He was selected as the first overall draft pick by the Los Angeles Lakers, where he would spend all of his storied career. Johnson’s tenure with the Lakers is known as the Showtime era, as Johnson’s passes to legendary scorer Kareem Abul-Jabbar led to exciting up-tempo fast breaks that, alongside flashy entertainment, filled the seats. There’s no doubt the on-court feats of the five-time NBA champion, three-time NBA Finals MVP, three-time NBA MVP, and college and pro hall of famer are extraordinary, but Johnson’s contribution to AIDS education in the 1990s was perhaps his greatest achievement: He changed how the world viewed the disease.

When Magic announced on November 7, 1991, that he had contracted the AIDS virus, it seemed to many that he was pronouncing his own death sentence. It was believed that Johnson had to quit basketball then, for the sake of his own health and for the peace of mind of his peers. He made a few cameo appearances, but when he tried to make a NBA comeback in the fall of 1992, the fears of some outspoken NBA players forced him to call it off.

Shunned from the NBA, Johnson wrote a book about safe sex and organized a worldwide touring basketball company to raise money and consciousness for the fight against AIDS. Between his high profile and his own admission that he engaged in numerous unprotected sexual encounters, he had probably done as much to educate the public about AIDS as anyone in that era.

By 1996, the work of AIDS awareness groups helped change the perception of how the virus was spread, and Magic got another shot: One more season with the Lakers. It wasn’t a stellar one, but it did show the world that there’s hope after an AIDS diagnosis. —with Steve Wulf

► **AWARDS & HONORS** NBA 50th and 75th Anniversary Teams ► NBA Lifetime Achievement Award ► Olympic Gold Medal 1992 ► J. Walter Kennedy Citizenship Award 1992 ► Jackie Robinson Sports Award 1992 ► Los Angeles Lakers No. 32 retired ► Michigan State Spartans No. 33 retired ► Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame ► FIBA Hall of Fame ► U.S. Olympic Hall of Fame



Jordan dunks during Game 3 of the 1990-'91 NBA Eastern Conference Semifinals. Inset: Jordan holds the Larry O'Brien Trophy after winning the NBA Championship in 1997.

MICHAEL JORDAN

/ BASKETBALL

B. 1963 | Michael Jordan, widely considered basketball's greatest of all time, became a worldwide cultural phenomenon in the 1980s and 1990s. He was named the top North American athlete by ESPN in 2009. Perhaps one of the most enduring symbols of Jordan's popularity is Nike's Air Jordan sneakers, which are still prized after nearly 40 years on the market. At 6 feet, 6 inches, Jordan was not tall by NBA standards but made up for it with his athleticism and his incredible leaping ability. He became a symbol of American values—a winner with a blue-collar work ethic, tenacity, focus, and supreme self-assuredness. As *TIME* put it in 1998, “Jordan is a vessel into which America can pour anything it wants. He’s noble, charming, righteous and kind, not because he necessarily is but because we want him to be.”

Jordan played three seasons with the North Carolina Tarheels before he was drafted by the Chicago Bulls in 1984. As a freshman at North Carolina, he made the game-winning jump shot in the closing seconds of the NCAA championship against Georgetown, giving the Tarheels their first national title since 1957. Years later, Jordan told the late sports reporter Craig Sager, “That was the birth of Michael Jordan.”

In Chicago, Jordan earned Rookie of the Year honors, was injured the next year, then returned

to lead the league in points scored for seven consecutive seasons. In the first round of the 1986 playoffs, he scored an incredible 63 points against the Boston Celtics; afterward, opponent Larry Bird said, “I think it’s just God disguised as Michael Jordan.” Jordan was named NBA MVP five times and earned the NBA Finals MVP pick six times, leading the Bulls to six NBA titles in his 13 seasons there.

But oh, the dunking. Back then, the dunk contests during the All-Star break were worth watching. On his home turf in 1988, Jordan wowed TV viewers by scoring a perfect 50 points, winning his second slam-dunk title in a row. The iconic image of Michael in flight was trademarked for use on Nike’s Air Jordan line of sneakers and clothing.

A ticket stub for Jordan’s debut game with the Bulls sold for \$264,000 in 2021, setting the record for most expensive collectible sports ticket ever sold.

▶ AWARDS & HONORS 14-time NBA All-Star ▶ All-Star Game MVP 1988, 1996, 1998 ▶ 10-time All-NBA First Team ▶ Nine-time NBA All-Defensive First Team ▶ 10-time NBA scoring champion ▶ NBA steals leader 1988, 1990, 1993 ▶ NBA Slam Dunk Contest champion 1987, 1988 ▶ NCAA champion 1982 ▶ Oscar Robertson Trophy 1984 ▶ *Sporting News* National Player of the Year 1983, 1984 ▶ Chicago Bulls No. 23 retired ▶ Miami Heat No. 23 retired ▶ NBA 50th Anniversary Team ▶ NBA 75th Anniversary Team ▶ Presidential Medal of Freedom

JACKIE JOYNER-KERSEE

/TRACK & FIELD

B. 1962 | Jackie Joyner-Kersey, whose grandmother named her after the famous first lady of the United States, was born a long way from 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. The second of four children—her parents were 14 and 16 at the time they wed—young Jackie grew up in East St. Louis, Illinois, in a neighborhood where her dad worked for a time “watching cars.”

Joyner discovered her incredible ability to jump from being a cheerleader at a local youth center, “That’s when I started running and jumping off my porch,” she told *TIME* in 1988. She caught the eye of local coach Nino Fennoy, who steered her through a series of Junior Olympics championships and a busy high school career in basketball and volleyball, which landed her a basketball scholarship at UCLA. There, she made the Bruins’ all-time lists in almost every category on the court, participated in long jump, and met the assistant track coach, Bob Kersee.

She and Kersee set her sights on the 1984 Olympic heptathlon in Los Angeles. Joyner-Kersey was the favorite in the event that year, but narrowly missed gold. In 1986, she became the first female heptathlete to score over 7,000 points in the heptathlon event at the Goodwill Games in Moscow, cementing her dominance in the sport. At the 1988 Olympics in Seoul, she beat her own heptathlon record, scoring 7,291 points, taking home a heptathlon gold and another in long jump. The record still stands.

In Barcelona 1992, she became the first female heptathlete to win back-to-back golds. Due to a hamstring injury, she had to withdraw from the heptathlon during her final Olympics in 1996, but took home a bronze in long jump. She played pro basketball for a short time before returning to the Goodwill Games in 1998, where she won the heptathlon for the fourth time.

Joyner-Kersey married coach Bob Kersee in 1986. In 1988, she started the Jackie Joyner-Kersey Foundation to help provide resources for at-risk children, particularly in her hometown.

Joyner-Kersey celebrates her gold medal in the heptathlon at the 1992 Olympics in Barcelona, Spain.



▶ AWARDS & HONORS Three Olympic Gold Medals > Four World Championship Gold Medals > Four Goodwill Games Gold Medals > Honda Sports Award 1983, 1985 > James E. Sullivan Award 1986 > Jesse Owens Award 1986, 1987 > Jack Buck Awards Sports Personality of the Year 1988 > NCAA Silver Anniversary Awards Honoree > U.S. Olympic Hall of Fame

AARON JUDGE

/ BASEBALL

B. 1992 | Standing 6 feet, 7 inches tall and weighing over 280 pounds, Aaron Judge is one of the biggest sluggers in MLB history. There's no doubt that his stature is an advantage at the plate, but is he worth a massive \$360 million over nine years? The New York Yankees say yes.

Judge was drafted in the first round by the New York Yankees in 2013. After a stint in the minors, he played his first Yankees game in August 2016, hit a home run at his first at-bat, then hit a home run in his second game for the club. His season was cut short by an injury, but he came back swinging for an unbelievable rookie season in 2017.

In 2017, Judge set a new rookie home-run record, with 52 (Pete Alonso of the New York Mets broke that mark two seasons later). Injuries curtailed Judge's home-run numbers the next three years. Always looking for that edge, in 2021, he adjusted how he held the bat at the plate, bringing it more in front of his face. This enables him to coil his hips and load up his power before swinging through the ball. This action creates a slingshot effect. "You want to stretch the rubber band all the way out," Judge told TIME. "And once you get to that moment, you want to release it."

In 2022, Judge signed a single-year contract with the Yankees and hit an AL record-breaking 62 home runs, then he became a free agent for the 2023 season, and New York bit. Despite missing 56 games in 2023, he racked up 37 homers and was selected for the All-MLB Team. And he has some years left. —with Sean Gregory



Judge after a solo homer at Yankee Stadium in April 2022.

▶ AWARDS & HONORS Five-time MLB All-Star ▶ Roberto Clemente Award 2023 ▶ AL MVP 2022 ▶ All-MLB First Team 2021, 2022 ▶ TIME Athlete of the Year 2022 ▶ AL Hank Aaron Award 2022 ▶ AL Rookie of the Year 2017 ▶ Silver Slugger Award 2017, 2021, 2022



Kelce runs the ball during the Super Bowl game against the San Francisco 49ers in 2024.

TRAVIS KELCE

/FOOTBALL

B. 1989 | If you look beyond the tabloid headlines, Travis Kelce is a big deal on his own.

Kelce grew up in a sports family in Cleveland Heights, Ohio, alongside his older brother, Jason, who retired from the Philadelphia Eagles in 2024. The two played together at the University of Cincinnati, where, after being suspended for testing positive for marijuana, Travis redeemed himself and had a breakout senior year. The Kansas City Chiefs took Travis in the third round, 63rd overall, in the 2013 NFL Draft.

Kelce was sidelined in 2013 due to a knee injury, but came back the next year as the Chief's leading receiver, totaling 862 yards off 67 receptions. He finished the 2015 season with 72 catches for 875 yards and five touchdowns, and the Chiefs made it to the playoffs. As a favorite target of Chief's quarterback Patrick Mahomes, he racked up more than 1,000 receiving yards in each season between 2016 and 2022—a record for tight ends. In 2020, the Chiefs won their first Super Bowl since 1970, and picked up two more Lombardi Trophies for the 2022 and 2023 seasons.

Kelce currently holds the overall NFL record for career post-season receptions (165), and numerous

records in the tight-end category. In addition to his seven seasons receiving 1,000-plus yards, he holds records for receiving yards in a season (1,416), career postseason yards (1,903), 100-plus reception seasons (3), fewest games to 10,000 receiving yards (140), and 100 receiving yard games (37).

Kelce received the Chiefs' Ed Bloch Courage Award in 2014. In 2015, Kelce started Eighty-Seven & Running, a nonprofit dedicated to giving underserved youth the support to cultivate their talents. He has made generous donations to youth programs in Kansas City, including 25,000 breakfast meals for students and \$500,000 to a program that provides STEM learning opportunities for disadvantaged kids. He also launched Catching for a Cause, a charity that raises cash for Kansas City's youth every time he makes a catch. He also supports Make a Wish, the Boys & Girls Club of America, and Read Across America.

▶ AWARDS & HONORS Super Bowl Champion 2020, 2023, 2024 ▶ First Team All-Pro 2016, 2018, 2020, 2022 ▶ Nine Pro Bowls ▶ NFL All-Decade Team 2010s



King plays a backhand volley during the 1967 Wimbledon women's singles finals.

BILLIE JEAN KING

/TENNIS

B. 1943 | After winning Wimbledon in 1968, the men's champion, Rod Laver, walked away with \$4,800. Billie Jean King, the women's champion, left with just \$1,800. At other events, the gap in pay was even wider. King—who won 129 career titles, including 12 Grand Slam singles titles—fought to change that.

As the dominant force in tennis at the time, she had a lot to lose, but she never lost sight of the bigger picture. She turned her back on the U.S. Tennis Association as leader of the “Original 9” group of women who fought for gender equality in tennis, and founded the Women's Tennis Association. “We had one dream, and that was to create an opportunity where any girl—if she was good enough—could make a living playing professional tennis,” King

told time in TIME 2011. “Today they are living the dream, and we need to continue to make progress for all girls. Women from around the globe have chosen tennis as a career, and I am so proud of the champions in our sport as they truly embody our vision from 1970.”

In 1972, King became the first ever female athlete to be named *Sports Illustrated* Sportsperson of the Year. In 1973, King defeated former men's No. 1 Bobby Riggs in a nationally televised matched dubbed the “Battle of the Sexes.” (Riggs, who played the role of male chauvinist rather well, had beaten Margaret Court in a similar televised match earlier that year and spent the interim taunting female players.) In 1974, King founded the Women's Sports Foundation, an educational nonprofit that focuses on advancing women and girls through athletics. In 1981, she blazed another trail: She became one of the first professional female athletes to come out as a lesbian.

After retiring from the court, King went on to advocate for women in sports, equality, and social justice. She was inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame in 1990; in 2006, the USTA National Tennis Center, home of the U.S. Open Grand Slam, was renamed for her; and in 2020, the Fed Cup was renamed the Billie Jean King Cup. —with William Lee Adams

► **AWARDS & HONORS** AP Female Athlete of the Year 1967 ► Arthur Ashe Courage Award 1999
► ITF Philippe Chatrier Award 2003 ► Sunday Times Sports Women of the Year Lifetime Achievement 2007 ►
International Tennis Hall of Fame ► National Gay and Lesbian Sports Hall of Fame

OLGA KORBUT

/GYMNASTICS

B. 1955 | At the 1972 Olympic Games in Munich, Belarus-born gymnast Olga Korbut revolutionized the sport. Before Korbut, gymnastics was influenced by ballet-inspired elegance, pleasing to watch but lacking the excitement we see today. Korbut's explosive and technically brilliant routines were infused with pure athleticism, and paired with her charisma and endearing smile, pushed the popularity of gymnastics to new levels.

Korbut began a grueling training regimen with Soviet coach Renald Knysh (who she later accused of sexual abuse) as a young girl. At the time, the Cold War was raging and the historically stoic Soviet athletes were viewed with skepticism and rarely, if ever, showed emotion. Up until 1972, the Soviets dominated gymnastics with their graceful, flowing routines. The 17-year-old Korbut, standing at under 5 feet tall, would change that.

Korbut had been perfecting two acrobatic moves never seen in the Olympics before: a backward aerial somersault on the beam and a backflip-to-catch on the uneven bars. The moves are now known as the Korbut salto and the Korbut flip, respectively. Feats of strength, power, and agility, the moves added an element of excitement to her performances that drew audiences in. In Munich, she performed the Korbut

salto and won individual gold in the balance beam and another gold in the floor exercise. After completing the stunning routines, the slight, pig-tailed dynamo abandoned typical Soviet intensity and displayed a beaming, adorable smile and became an instant media darling. When she broke down in tears after a disappointing uneven bars performance, the love only intensified. "We had the impression that every athlete from the Soviet Union was an unemotional machine. Then she came along, this vulnerable little girl. Everyone wanted to hug her," U.S. Olympic gymnast Bart Conner told *The New York Times* in 2002.

Korbut missed her chance at all-around gold in 1972, but she did score a 9.8 in the uneven bars in the team finals, earning her a silver in the event. "The Sparrow from Minsk," as she was dubbed, became a major draw and the Soviet team's ticket to exhibition performances in Europe and America. Korbut also competed in Montreal in 1976, winning a silver, then retired in 1977.

Although Korbut was not one of the most decorated gymnasts of all time, her performances in Munich in 1972 revealed that there was humanity behind the Iron Curtain and transformed what had been a stuffy niche sport into mass entertainment.

AWARDS & HONORS

Four Olympic Gold Medals > Two World Championships > BBC World Sport Star of the Year 1972 > ABC Wide World of Sports Athlete of the Year 1972 > International Gymnastics Hall of Fame

Korbut defies gravity at the European Women's Artistic Gymnastics Championships in 1973.



KATIE LEDECKY

/SWIMMING

B. 1997 | To date, Katie Ledecky has won more gold medals than any other female swimmer: seven Olympic golds and 21 World Championship medals. She also has 16 individual World Championship medals, more than any other male or female swimmer.

Born in Washington, D.C., and raised in suburban Maryland, Ledecky made her Olympic debut at age 15, at the 2012 London Games. She stunned the swim world by winning gold in the 800 meters, setting a fast pace that has become her trademark in distance races. In the years that followed, Ledecky continued to carve seconds off her previous personal best times, most of which were world records, and for a while, she set new records each time she dove into the pool.

At the 2016 Games in Rio, she won four golds—the 200-m freestyle, 400-m freestyle, 800-m freestyle, and 4 x 200-m freestyle relay. She also took home a silver in the 4 x 100-m freestyle relay. And she set two world records: in the 400-m freestyle (3 minutes, 56.46 seconds) and in the 800-m freestyle (8 minutes, 4.79 seconds).

In the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, Ledecky took a disappointing fifth in the 200-meter freestyle, but took the first gold in the newly debuted

1,500-meter freestyle the same day. Three days later, she defended her 800-meter freestyle title in decisive fashion. She also took silvers in the 400 meters and as part of the 4 x 200-meter freestyle relay in which she swam a masterful come-from-behind anchor leg.

“There will never be another Katie Ledecky,” said Rowdy Gaines, a three-time Olympic gold medalist, in 2021. “She’s a once-in-a-lifetime athlete.”

Ledecky is currently training for the 2024 Summer Olympics in Paris. —with Alice Park

AWARDS & HONORS Five Swimming World World Swimmer of the Year Awards > Eight Swimming World American Swimmer of the Year Awards > Five-time USA Swimming Athlete of the Year > Five USA Swimming Performance of the Year Awards > Nine-time Golden Goggle Female Athlete of the Year > Five-time Golden Goggle Female Race of the Year > FINA Swimmer of the Year 2013, 2022 > FINA Best Swimming Performance of the Year 2015, 2016 > AP Female Athlete of the Year 2017, 2022 > TIME 100 Most Influential People 2016

Ledecky celebrates winning gold in the 1,500-meter freestyle at the 2020 Olympics in Tokyo.





Lemieux skates in a game against the New Jersey Devils in the 1990s.

MARIO LEMIEUX

/HOCKEY

B. 1965 | Canadian Mario Lemieux was chosen by the Pittsburgh Penguins as the first overall pick in the 1984 NHL draft. He played parts of 17 seasons in Pittsburgh and became an owner of the team. He is the only person to have won a Stanley Cup as both a player and an owner.

His first season, Lemieux was named to the All-Star Team, scored 100 points, and received the league's rookie of the year honors.

In a December 31, 1988, game against the New Jersey Devils, Lemieux earned eight points, with five goals and three assists. But each goal was different; Lemieux became the only NHL player to score in all five possible game situations in a single game—full strength, short-handed, power play, penalty shot, and empty net. He repeated this feat in April 1989.

Lemieux had back surgery in July 1990 and missed 50 games that season. Despite the pain, he scored 16 goals and 28 assists in the playoffs, helping the Penguins win their first Stanley Cup. Despite being injury-plagued in the 1991 season, he won the Art Ross Trophy for the third time and the Penguins swept the Chicago Blackhawks in the Stanley Cup Finals for their second consecutive championship.

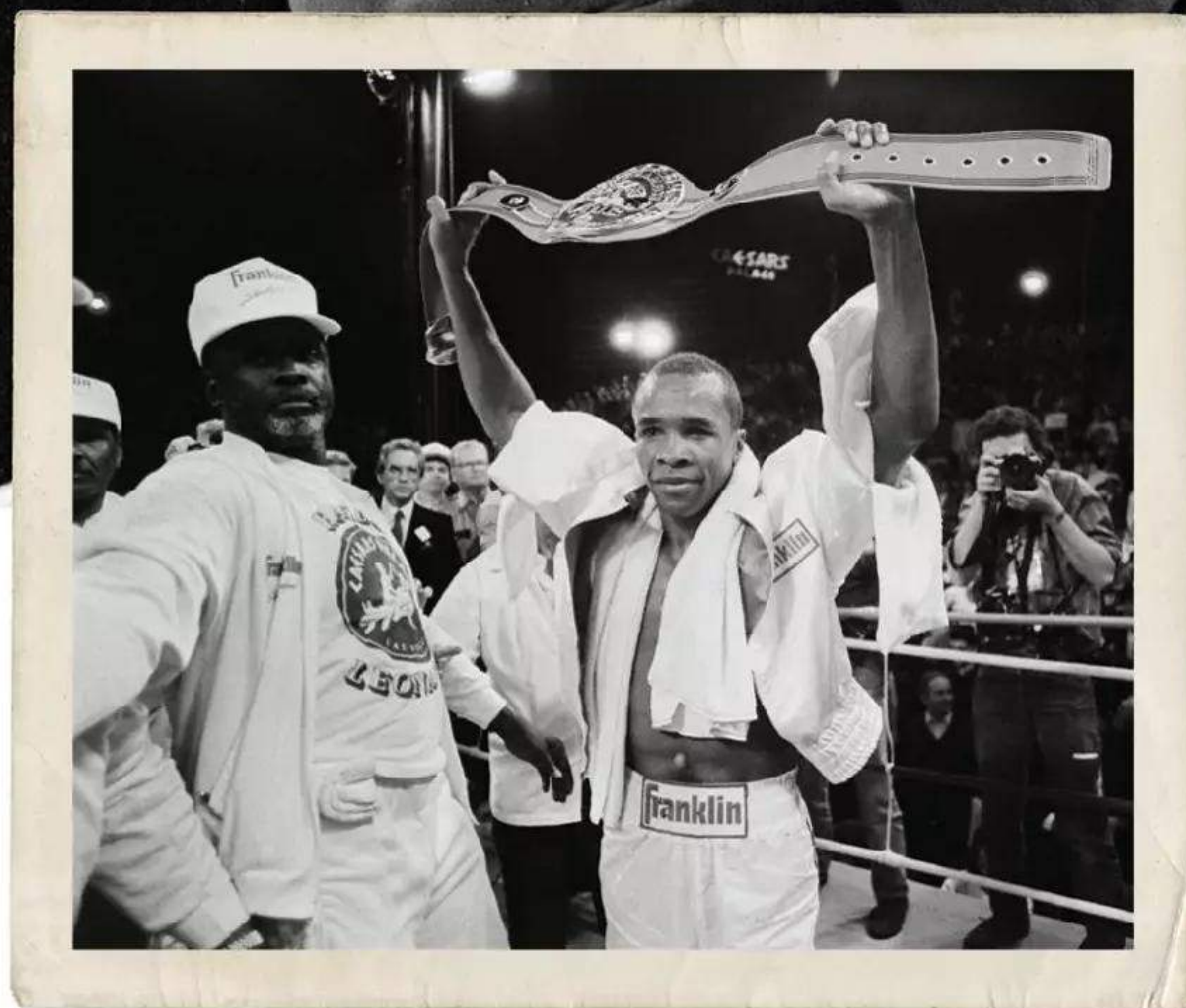
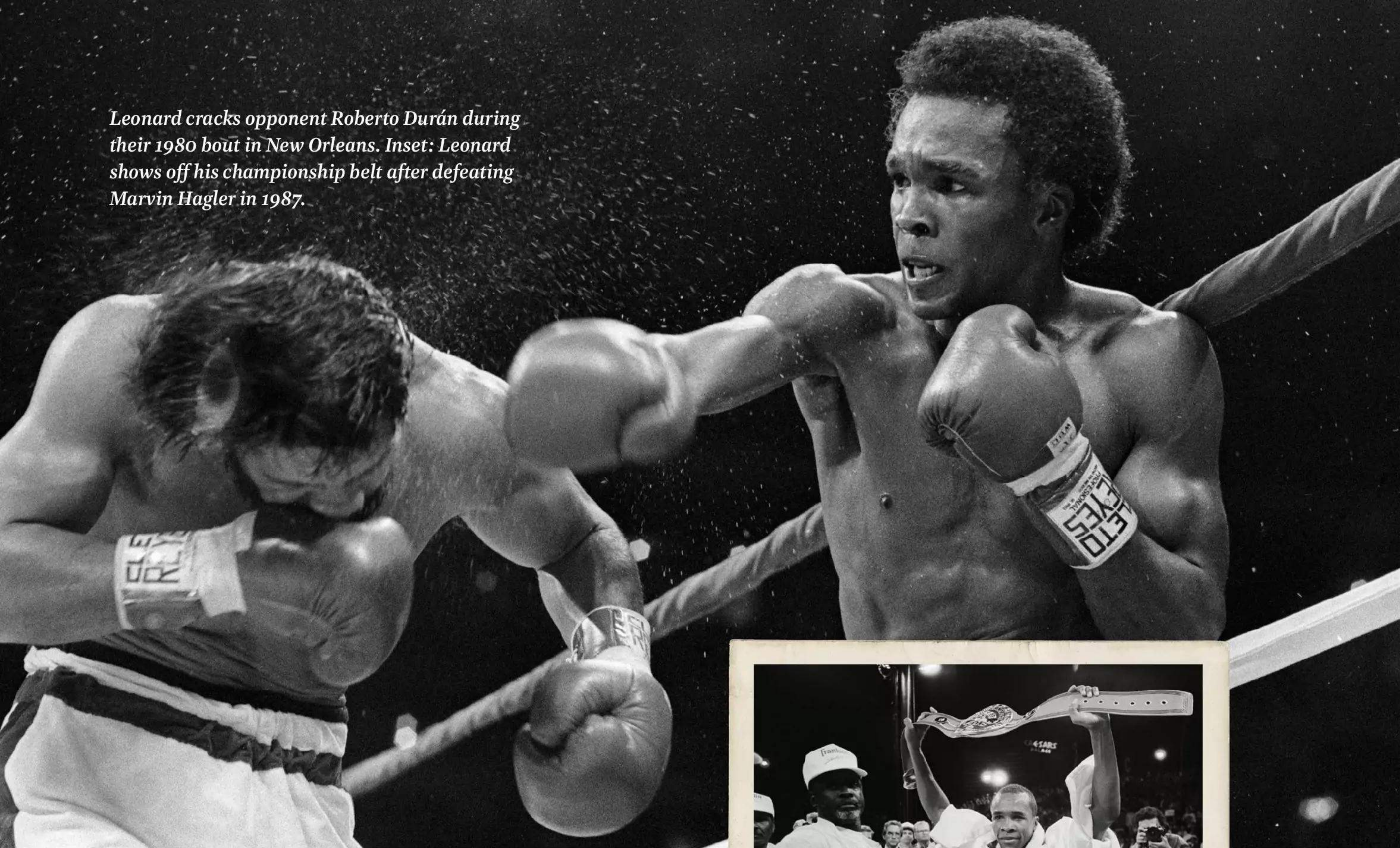
In January of 1993, Lemieux was diagnosed with Hodgkin lymphoma and missed two months of the season for treatments. He rejoined the Penguins in March. Lemieux finished the season with 160 points (69 goals, 91 assists) in 60 games.

He had another back surgery in 1993, took a leave in 1994, but returned in 1995 to score his 500th career goal in his 605th game. In the 1996 season, he won his sixth scoring title with 122 points (50 goals, 72 assists). He retired in 1997.

In 1988, the Penguins went into bankruptcy and Lemieux bailed them out, becoming majority owner. He returned to the ice as a player-owner in 2000, retiring in 2006.

▶ AWARDS & HONORS Ted Lindsay Award 1986, 1988, 1993, 1996 ▶ Six Art Ross Trophies ▶ 12 All-Star Games ▶ Calder Memorial Trophy 1985 ▶ NHL All-Star Game MVP 1985, 1988, 1990 ▶ Hart Memorial Trophy 1988, 1993, 1996 ▶ Conn Smythe Trophy 1991, 1992 ▶ Bill Masterton Trophy 1993 ▶ Lester Patrick Trophy 2000 ▶ Hockey Hall of Fame ▶ Canada's Sports Hall of Fame

Leonard cracks opponent Roberto Durán during their 1980 bout in New Orleans. Inset: Leonard shows off his championship belt after defeating Marvin Hagler in 1987.



SUGAR RAY LEONARD

/BOXING

B. 1956 | In 1990, Sugar Ray Leonard received the Mark Grossinger Etes Award for Boxer of the Decade for the 1980s, which, considering his competition (Tyson, Hagler, Spinks, Holyfield, Holmes), says a lot.

At the close of his successful amateur career, which culminated in an Olympic gold medal in 1976, Leonard planned to attend the University of Maryland on scholarship. However, his girlfriend and the mother of his young son filed a paternity suit shortly before the Olympics and the bad press scared off any lucrative endorsements he was expecting. Leonard had to support his child, his girlfriend, and his ailing parents, so he turned pro.

Leonard won his first title in the WBC Welterweight Championship in November 1979 against Wilfred Benítez, then lost it in April 1980 to Roberto Durán. He fought Durán again in November of the same year and won. In 1981, he beat Thomas Hearns in the WBA Welterweight Championship when the referee stopped the fight in the 14th round. “The Showdown,” as the fight was billed, was named Fight of the Year by *The Ring*.

Leonard retired in 1982 after suffering a detached retina, and returned briefly in 1984.

After undergoing surgery to protect his retina, he announced in 1986 that he would be fighting WBC Middleweight Champion Marvin Hagler. The widely anticipated matchup that took place on April 6, 1987, is considered one of the greatest fights ever. *TIME* wrote, “Sixty-two months between real fights, five years since retinal surgery, three years after his first melancholy comeback, Sugar Ray Leonard returned to boxing at 30 for the simple reason that he does it better and enjoys it more than anything else in life. Without a tune-up, he challenged Marvin Hagler, an apocalyptic figure of undetermined age, unbeaten for more than a decade. It was not one of the greatest fights anyone had ever seen, just one of the greatest performances everyone will forever recall.” The fight lasted all 12 rounds, and Leonard won by decision.

Leonard retired again in 1991, had a few comebacks, and hung up the gloves for good in 1997 after losing to Héctor Camacho. He was 40.

▶ **AWARDS & HONORS** 36 wins in 40 fights (26 KOs) ▶ Boxing Writers Association of America Fighter of the Year 1976, 1979, 1981 ▶ *The Ring* Fighter of the Year 1979, 1981 ▶ *The Ring* Greatest Living Boxer 2016 ▶ International Boxing Hall of Fame

Lewis wins the 100 meters and his first of four golds at the 1984 Summer Games in Los Angeles.

CARL LEWIS

/TRACK & FIELD

B. 1961 | New Jersey native Carl Lewis won nine Olympic gold medals in the 1980s and 1990s. He attended the University of Houston, where he won the 1980 NCAA championships in long jump and showed talent as a sprinter. He qualified for the 1980 Summer Olympics in long jump and as a member of the 4 x 100-meter relay team, but the U.S. boycotted in protest of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

At the first World Championships in 1983, Lewis won the 100-meter and long jump, and at a separate meet later that year, he became the first person to finish the 100-meter at low altitude in under 10 seconds (9.97 seconds).

At the highly anticipated 1984 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles, Lewis, on a quest to match Jesse Owens' performance in 1936, entered four events: 100 meters, 200 meters, 4 x 100-meter relay, and long jump. He took gold in the 100 meters in under 10 seconds, then won gold in the long jump in a single 28-foot jump, which was not a world record, but Lewis knew it was good enough for the win. His strategy was to conserve energy and not risk injury by completing more jumps, but the crowd, who wanted to see him break the record, booed him. He then went on to win the 200 meters and set a world record anchoring the 4 x 100-meter relay, taking home two more golds.

At the 1988 Summer Olympics in Seoul, Lewis' rival in the 100 meters, Canadian Ben Johnson, set a world record with a 9.79-second finish, narrowly beating Lewis, but Johnson was disqualified for PED use and Lewis was took home the gold. His long jump, a low-altitude Olympic best at 28 feet, 7¼ inches, earned him another gold.

His personal bests came at the 1991 World Championships. Lewis, then 30, set the world record in the 100-meter at 9.86 seconds. In the long jump, he faced fellow American Mike Powell in a historic match—Powell's winning jump of 29 feet, 4¼ inches, and Lewis' final two jumps of 29 feet, 1 inch and 29 feet, still stand as the longest jumps ever in legal conditions. Lewis completed his career with a final Olympic gold in the long jump in 1996.



▶ AWARDS & HONORS James E. Sullivan Award 1981 ▶ Track & Field News Athlete of the Year 1982, 1983, 1984 ▶ World Athletics Athlete of the Century ▶ IOC Sportsman of the Century ▶ *Sports Illustrated* Olympian of the Century ▶ New Jersey Hall of Fame ▶ Texas Track & Field Coaches Association Hall of Fame



Packers players celebrate with Lombardi after defeating the Dallas Cowboys to win the NFL Championship in 1967.

VINCE LOMBARDI

/FOOTBALL

1913-1970 | There the 1966 Green Bay Packers team stood, some as tall as 6 feet, 6 inches, bulging with the kind of muscles it takes to bend a railroad spike between thumb and forefinger. Their team had already won its fifth National Football League division championship in seven years, and they likely could have cared less that they still had one regular-season game to play against the Los Angeles Rams. So why were they doing push-ups and running wind sprints? Could it really have been because a chubby man with dark-rimmed glasses was screaming at them: “You don’t have any pride! All you have is shame! You’re a disgrace to the National Football League!”

It could indeed. When Coach Vince Lombardi chewed out his Green Bay Packers, they said, “Yessir, Coach Lombardi-sir.” And they meant it. Lombardi

was the toughest coach of one of the toughest teams in pro football, a team that went 12-2 and won the first Super Bowl.

How did he do it? Pure grit. No subtlety. No fancy offensive formations, no kamikaze blitzes on defense. Lombardi simply didn’t allow mistakes. “Football is blocking and tackling,” Lombardi told TIME in 1966. “If you block and tackle better than the other people, you win.”

The 1966 Packers were not Lombardi’s only championship team. In nine seasons with the Pack, Lombardi led four others: 1961, 1962, 1965, and 1967.

In 1959, when he accepted the head coaching job in Green Bay, the team’s previous year record was 1-10-1, the worst in franchise history despite having six future Hall of Famers on the roster. When he took the helm, Lombardi demanded complete command of the operations on and off the field. His first season showed improvement—the team finished 7-5, they were NFL Western Conference champs for the first time in 16 years, and Lombardi was named NFL Coach of the Year. Fans responded too. Every home game was sold out for the 1960 season, and every Packers home game has been sold out since. (As of April 2024, there are more than 130,000 names on the wait list for season tickets.)

Coach Lombardi never had a losing season in the NFL. In 1971, he was elected into the Pro Football Hall of Fame and the Super Bowl trophy was named in his honor.

▶ AWARDS & HONORS Pro Football Hall of Fame ▶ Wisconsin Athletic Hall of Fame ▶ Fordham University Athletic Hall of Fame ▶ American Football Association’s Semi Pro Football Hall of Fame ▶ New Jersey Hall of Fame ▶ Boy Scouts of America Silver Buffalo Award ▶ U.S. Postage Stamp

JOE LOUIS

/BOXING

1914-1981 | Between 1937 and 1949 Joe Louis was unstoppable in the ring. He held the heavyweight crown for a record 12 years, successfully defending his title 25 times—a pro boxing record. He is considered one of the top heavyweights of all time.

The seventh of eight children, Joseph Louis Barrow was born in Chambers County, Alabama, and moved with his family to Detroit when he was a boy. Young Louis toted ice for fishermen to keep shoes on his feet and left school after the fifth grade. He found refuge from the rough city streets at a local rec center, where he learned to box.

While fighting as an amateur, he was discovered by John Roxborough, a boxing manager and gambler who set Louis up with promoter Louis Black. As a team, they managed Louis' career and developed his image as an ambassador of racial goodwill—for this, Roxborough and Black pocketed half of Louis' winnings.

As Louis' career soared, so did his popularity. He was one of the first Black people to be embraced across the country, not merely as an athlete and

celebrity, but as a patriot. In 1942, he enlisted in the Army, and along with other fighters, staged boxing matches all over the world, eventually performing for more than 2 million American troops. The Army used him as a recruitment tool, and he appeared, as himself, in a 1943 wartime comedy musical. After earning the Legion of Merit, Louis was released from service in 1945. Despite earning over \$2 million in purses before his stint in the Army, he returned home to total financial ruin.

Louis was known for his generosity: He supported family members, dumped money into friends' businesses, and paid off their big tabs. Tax troubles forced him back to the ring, defending his title in a bout with Billie Conn and two more with Jersey Joe Walcott before retiring in 1949. Louis had to make another comeback the following year and retired after losing to Rocky Marciano in 1951.

In addition to his boxing accomplishments, Louis helped break the color barrier in pro golf: In 1952, he became the first Black person to compete in a PGA-sanctioned event as an invited amateur.

▶ AWARDS & HONORS

AP Athlete of the Year Award 1935 ▶ Five-time *The Ring* Fight of the Year ▶ *The Ring* Fighter of the Year 1936, 1938, 1939, 1941 ▶ Sugar Ray Robinson Award 1941 ▶ IRBO Best Heavyweight Boxer of All Time ▶ Congressional Gold Medal ▶ U.S. Postage Stamp ▶ International Boxing Hall of Fame

Louis stands over boxer Max Schmeling after knocking him out in the first round of their 1938 rematch.



PATRICK MAHOMES

/FOOTBALL

B. 1995 | In the 2024 Super Bowl, with his team down three points in overtime, Kansas City Chiefs quarterback Patrick Mahomes orchestrated a stunning comeback drive that started on his own 25-yard line.

The Chiefs trailed the San Francisco 49ers 22-19 and needed a field goal to extend the game. So Mahomes went to work: On a fourth-and-one—the brink of elimination—Mahomes ran 8 yards for a first down. He threw on a third-and-six, hitting Rashee Rice for 13 yards. Then he converted on another third down by scrambling 19 yards to put the ball on San Francisco's 13. A pass up the middle to tight end Travis Kelce got the ball to the 3 yard line and a crucial first down.

Then wide receiver Mecole Hardman started the next play with a short run before changing directions. Mahomes took the snap, faked a run, and flicked it to Hardman, wide open in the end zone. “I blacked out when I caught the ball,” Hardman said afterward.

On a drive of 75 yards that ended with Hardman's touchdown, Mahomes led the Chiefs to their third comeback Super Bowl in five years, the first back-to-back Super Bowl victories in two decades, and a new standard of NFL excellence.

On the drive, Mahomes didn't throw a single incomplete pass. He went eight for eight for 42 passing yards, and he ran for 27 more. He accounted for 69 of those 75 Super Bowl-winning yards.

After six seasons in Kansas City, Mahomes currently holds numerous league passing records, and, at age 28, it seems like he's just getting started.
—with Sean Gregory

Mahomes looks to fire a pass during the first quarter of the 2024 Super Bowl.



AWARDS & HONORS NFL MVP 2018, 2022 > Super Bowl MVP 2020, 2023, 2024 > NFL Offensive Player of the Year 2018 > Bert Bell Award 2018 > First-team All-Pro 2018, 2022 > NFL passing touchdowns leader 2018, 2022 > Six Pro Bowls > NFL passing yards leader 2022 > TIME 100 Most Influential People 2020, 2023, 2024

Manning calls out a play during a 2016 matchup against the New York Giants at Giants Stadium.

PEYTON MANNING

/FOOTBALL

B. 1976 | Quarterback Peyton Manning had a distinct style at the scrimmage line over his 18 years in the NFL. Intense and gesturing wildly, Peyton seemed to take every play call down to the last millisecond before the snap, frequently confounding defenders and gaining yardage.

Manning was born into football royalty, the son of college football legend Archie Manning, who had some hard luck in the pros. Still, there were times when Peyton didn't make success look all that easy.

He was raised in New Orleans and jilted his father's beloved alma mater, Ole Miss, to sign on with Tennessee. Although Manning starred for the Volunteers, he missed out on two big honors: the Heisman Trophy and a national title. Nonetheless, he was drafted as the first overall pick by the Indianapolis Colts in 1998.

He finally made it to a Super Bowl in 2006, when the Colts defeated the Chicago Bears. Manning's Colts reached their second Super Bowl in 2010 but lost to the New Orleans Saints. Meanwhile, in 2012 at Lucas Oil Stadium in Indianapolis—the house that Peyton built—his younger brother Eli won his second Super Bowl with the New York Giants against the New England Patriots.

By then, Peyton's career was in jeopardy. He missed the entire 2011 season after multiple neck surgeries, and the Colts struggled without him, eventually drafting QB Andrew Luck, and Manning signed on with Denver. Although his best days were supposed to be behind him, in 2012, the Broncos finished with the best record in the AFC. But they lost a playoff heartbreaker, at home, to the eventual champion



Baltimore Ravens. In 2013, at age 37, Manning broke two single-season records, passing for 5,477 yards and 55 touchdowns. Denver reached the Super Bowl, Manning's third. But Seattle blew them out, 43-8.

Fast-forward to Manning's surreal final season. He struggled, got benched, then missed time with a foot injury. Though no longer an all-time player, Manning, playing "game manager," won that elusive second ring, tying brother Eli. He decided, at age 39, that it was time to hang it up. —with Sean Gregory

▶ AWARDS & HONORS Five-time NFL MVP ▶ Bert Bell Award 2003, 2004, 2013 ▶ NFL Offensive Player of the Year 2004, 2013 ▶ 14 Pro Bowls ▶ Seven-time First-Team All-Pro ▶ Walter Payton Man of the Year Award 2005 ▶ Pro Bowl MVP 2005 ▶ Super Bowl MVP 2007 ▶ NFL Comeback Player of the Year 2012 ▶ Indianapolis Colts No. 18 retired ▶ Denver Broncos No. 18 retired

DIEGO MARADONA

/SOCCER

1960-2020 | Soccer great Diego Maradona hailed from a shantytown on the outskirts of Buenos Aires and made his professional debut with the club Argentinos Juniors when he was 15.

A decade later, that kid would score what was called the “Goal of the Century” during the 1986 World Cup in Mexico. In a quarterfinal match against England, Maradona led a 70-yard charge down the pitch. England goalkeeper Peter Shilton was the last line of defense: Maradona shimmied to his right, the ball still somehow on his left foot. Shilton slid right past him, before Maradona punched in the goal, giving Argentina a 2-0 lead. Argentina would go on to win its second World Cup title in that tournament.

Maradona netted that goal just four minutes after scoring the most controversial one: He knocked one in via an illegal handball. “A little with the head of Maradona and a little with the hand of God,” Maradona cheekily said afterward.

That 1986 Argentina-England World Cup quarterfinal, the game in which Maradona certified his legend, carried particular significance for

Argentina following the 1982 Falklands War. England had just won the military conflict with Argentina over sovereignty of the archipelago some 300 miles off of Argentina’s southern coast.

“Maradona scoring the first goal with the Hand of God, and the second goal being the greatest goal in history, it gave the Argentinians some type or redemption against the English,” Telemundo broadcaster Andrés Cantor, who has called every World Cup since 1990, told TIME in 2020.

In later World Cups, Maradona would not recapture the magic of the 1986 title. While he was still brilliant at the 1990 World Cup, Argentina lost to West Germany in the final; in 1994, he was kicked out of the tournament for testing positive for ephedrine.

Despite his imperfections, when Maradona died in November 2020, he was mourned the world over. Champions League games had moments of silence. The Vatican announced that Pope Francis was keeping Maradona in his prayers.

“Undoubtedly, for me, he is the greatest player of all time,” said Cantor. —with Sean Gregory

AWARDS & HONORS

Guerin Sportivo World Player of the Year 1979, 1986, 1987 > **Eric Batty’s World XI 1984, 1987** > **FIFA World Cup Golden Ball 1986** > **FIFA World Cup Silver Shoe 1986** > **FIFA World Cup most assists 1986** > **Onze d’Or 1986, 1987** > **AP Athlete of the Year 1986** > **FIFA World Cup All-Time Team** > **World Team of the 20th Century** > **Argentine Sports Writers’ Sportsman of the Century**



Maradona controls the ball during a match against Brazil in the 1982 FIFA World Cup in Barcelona.

ROCKY MARCIANO

/BOXING

1923-1969 | As a kid, future heavyweight champion Rocco Francis Marchegiano, who grew up in Brockton, Massachusetts, had little taste for fighting. He dreamed of big-league baseball, and he grew up to try just about everything else—from ditchdigger to dishwasher—and, in 1943, soldier. In the Army, Marchegiano discovered he made a good prizefighter. When he was a civilian again, he tried amateur boxing, and did so well that he turned pro in 1947. He changed his name to Rocky Marciano, and he was on his way.

Marciano was an awkward, hardheaded slugger, willing to take a punch to land one. But when he landed, his opponent usually dropped. Marciano never really bothered to learn how to box properly; he never really had to. Without ever losing a fight, he battered his way up through the heavyweight ranks.

In 1951, it took him only eight rounds to dispose of Joe Louis and ruin the great champ's comeback. The following year, he won the title by flattening Heavyweight Champion Joe Walcott in the 13th round, after being knocked down in the third for the first time in his professional life. In a return bout, it took him only one round to stop Jersey Joe.

In the fall of 1953, he defended his title against old rival Roland La Starza, winning by technical knockout in the 11th round. (In 1950, La Starza came as close as anyone had to beating Marciano.) *Boxing News* referred to Marciano's 1953 performance as "terrific punishment." Then came two consecutive bouts with former World Heavyweight Champion Ezzard Charles. In the first fight, Charles became the only boxer to last 15 rounds against Marciano, but he lost. In the second, Charles went down in the eighth round. Next came the British and European champion Don Cockell. Marciano put him down in the ninth.

In Marciano's last fight in 1955, Light Heavyweight Champion Archie Moore managed to put him on the canvas for the second time in Marciano's pro career, but the champ righted himself as solidly as a hogshead of ale, and in the ninth round knocked Moore out. Marciano was 31, and he still couldn't box, but he won all his 49 fights—43 by knockouts.

Marciano poses for the camera while training in New York in 1955.



► **AWARDS & HONORS** *The Ring* Fighter of the Year 1952, 1954, 1955 ► *The Ring* Fight of the Year 1952, 1953, 1954 ► Sugar Ray Robinson Award 1952 ► Hickok Belt 1952 ► ESPN 50 Greatest Boxers of All Time ► International Boxing Hall of Fame

MARTA

/SOCCER

B. 1986 | Brazilian Marta Vieira da Silva, commonly known as Marta, was named the FIFA World Player of the Year six times. She is arguably the best women's player ever to walk on the pitch.

The daughter of a poor family from the scrublands of Brazil's northeast, Marta had to force her brothers and his friends to let her play the game. She was discovered by a soccer coach at age 14 and played Brazilian club soccer for four years until she joined Umeå IK, a first-tier women's soccer club in Sweden. During her 2005 and 2006 seasons, the club went undefeated in the league and Marta led it with 21 goals both years. In 2007, she scored 25 goals. In 2009, she signed on with the now defunct Women's Professional Soccer league (WPS). When WPS folded in 2012, she returned to Sweden until 2017, when she moved back to the U.S. to join the National Women's Soccer League's Orlando Pride for its second season.

Marta is probably best known for her outstanding World Cup performances for the Brazil national team: She holds the record for most goals scored in World Cup history, male or female, with 17. In 2017, she led Brazil to the final round of the tournament and received the FIFA Women's World Cup Golden Boot for scoring seven goals and the Golden Ball as the top individual player. Although she never won a World Cup title, in 2023, she became the first person to score in six consecutive World Cups before announcing it was her last one.

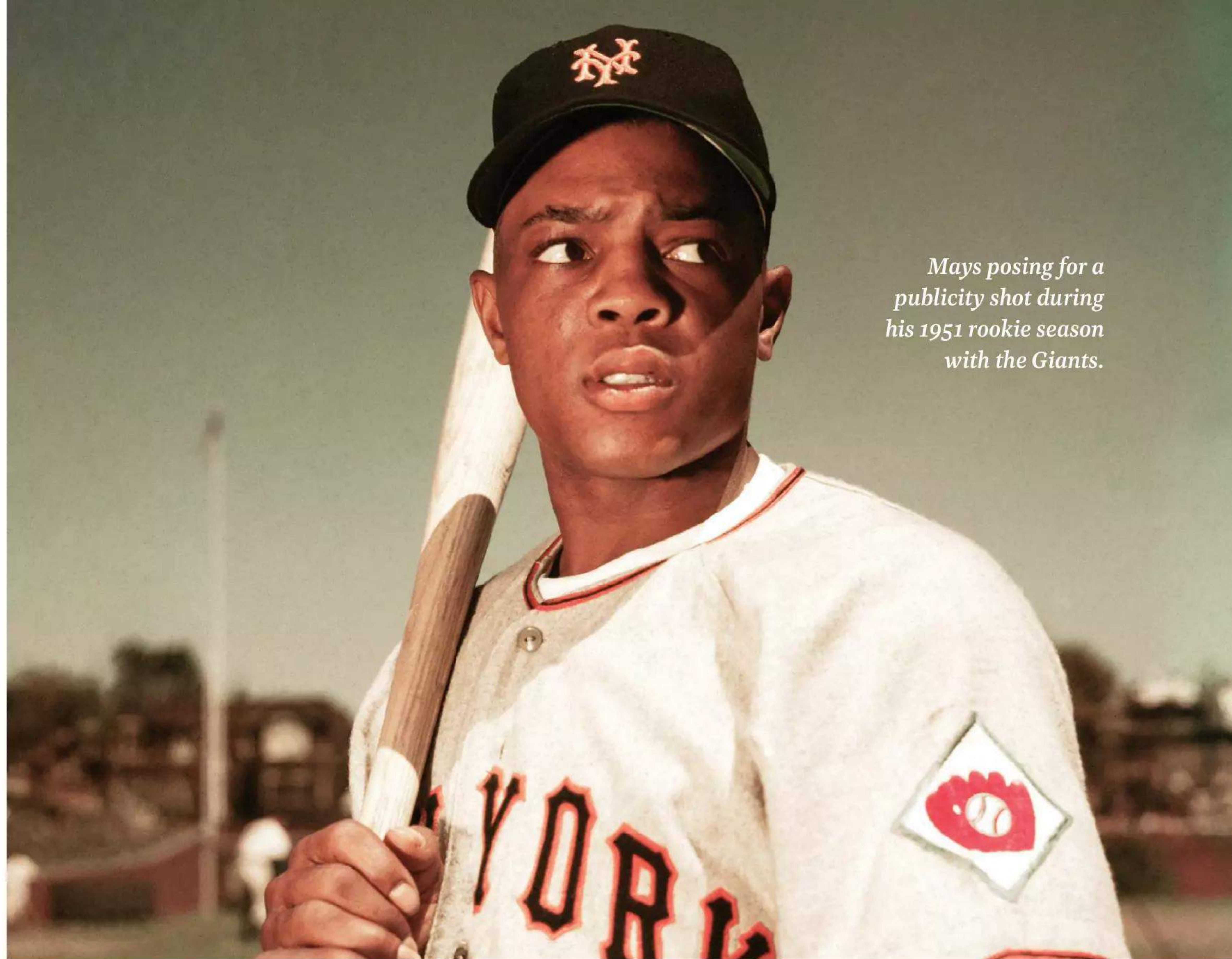
At the news conference after the disappointing loss, she addressed her legacy, "Do you know what's cool? When I started playing, I didn't have an idol, a female idol. You guys didn't show any female games. How was I supposed to see other players? ... Today, when we go out on the street, people stop."

Marta also saw her share of Olympic action. In 2021, she became the first player to score in five straight Olympics and took home silver medals for Brazil in 2004 and 2008.

Marta on the ball during the 2020 Olympics quarterfinal match against Canada.



AWARDS & HONORS WPS Golden Boot 2009, 2021, 2011
› Michelle Akers Player of the Year Award 2009, 2010 › FIFPro World XI 2016, 2017, 2019, 2021 › FIFA U-20 Women's World Cup Golden Ball 2004
› Sports Illustrated Top 20 Female Athletes of the Decade (2000s) › IFFHS World's Best Woman Player of the Decade 2011–2020 › IFFHS CONMEBOL Best Woman Player of the Decade 2011–2020 › IFFHS World's Woman Team of the Decade 2011–2020 › FIFA Best Special Award 2023



Mays posing for a publicity shot during his 1951 rookie season with the Giants.

WILLIE MAYS

/BASEBALL

B. 1931 | Willie Howard Mays, a young man from Westfield, Alabama, almost single-handedly transformed the perennially losing New York (later, San Francisco) Giants into a winning club. His charisma and obvious love of the game made him a fan favorite, setting the stage for wider mainstream acceptance of Black talent in all professions.

At centerfield, the Say Hey Kid was fast and canny, foiling batters at every turn. One of Mays' most famous plays, The Catch—considered by many baseball fans to be the greatest defensive play ever made—had him running down a 425-foot swat from Cleveland's Vic Wertz in the eighth inning of Game 1 of the 1954 World Series at the Polo Grounds. Mays caught it over his shoulder, his back to the plate, the ball landing in his glove, basket-style. Then he gunned a perfect throw to second base, keeping runners at first and third from advancing.

At the plate, Mays stood, with comfortable authority, in the classic legs-astraddle pose (weight about equally divided between both legs, feet about a yard apart). He still holds the National League record for putouts by an outfielder—7,095. At bat, he maintained an impressive .302 average. A spray hitter apt to send the ball anywhere on the field, he rarely tried to place his shots—he swung for the fences instead. “When you tag ‘em good,” Mays told *TIME* in 1954, “they’ll go over the roof in any park.”

One player does not make a winning team in the intricate, machine-tooled, split-second game of big-league baseball, but Mays did more than his fair share. “I don’t need to tell you where we are now,” said a Giants executive in 1954. “And I can’t help believing Willie is the reason.”

Mays entered the majors in 1951, just four years after Jackie Robinson integrated professional baseball. While Robinson helped win access to the game, Mays, through his effervescence on and off the field, helped Black Americans take another step toward acceptance.

In 2015, President Barack Obama awarded Mays the Presidential Medal of Freedom. “A few years ago, Willie rode with me on Air Force One,” Obama said at the White House ceremony that day. “I told him then what I’ll tell all of you now—it’s because of giants like Willie that someone like me could even think about running for President.” —with Sean Gregory

► **AWARDS & HONORS** NL Rookie of the Year 1951 ► World Series Champion 1954 ► 24-time All-Star ► 12 Gold Glove Awards ► Roberto Clemente Award 1971 ► San Francisco Giants No. 24 retired ► New York Mets No. 24 retired ► Major League Baseball All-Century Team ► Major League Baseball All-Time Team ► National Baseball Hall of Fame

MESSI

/SOCCER

B. 1987 | Lionel Messi's record eight Ballon d'Ors and a record six European Golden Shoes not only cement his place in the galaxy of greats, they also make him the centerpiece of a singular argument: whether he's the greatest of all time.

Born in Argentina, Messi was unique among his country's top soccer stars because he never represented an Argentine club. At 13, he left Argentina for Barcelona, Spain, where he played the majority of his career. He did play for Argentina's national team starting in 2005, but he didn't collect a lot of hardware for them, so he was far more popular across the world than at home. It wasn't until a Copa América and CONMEBOL–UEFA Cup of Champions in 2021 and the Argentinian team's 2022 World Cup (its first since 1986) that Argentina's fans joined the Messi bandwagon in droves.

But his collection of honors for Barcelona is extensive. With Messi leading the way, Barca redefined what could be achieved on the pitch. By the time he left Barca in 2021, Messi had racked up a club-record 34 trophies, including 10 La Liga titles, seven

Copa del Rey titles and Spanish Super Cups, and four UEFA Champions League wins.

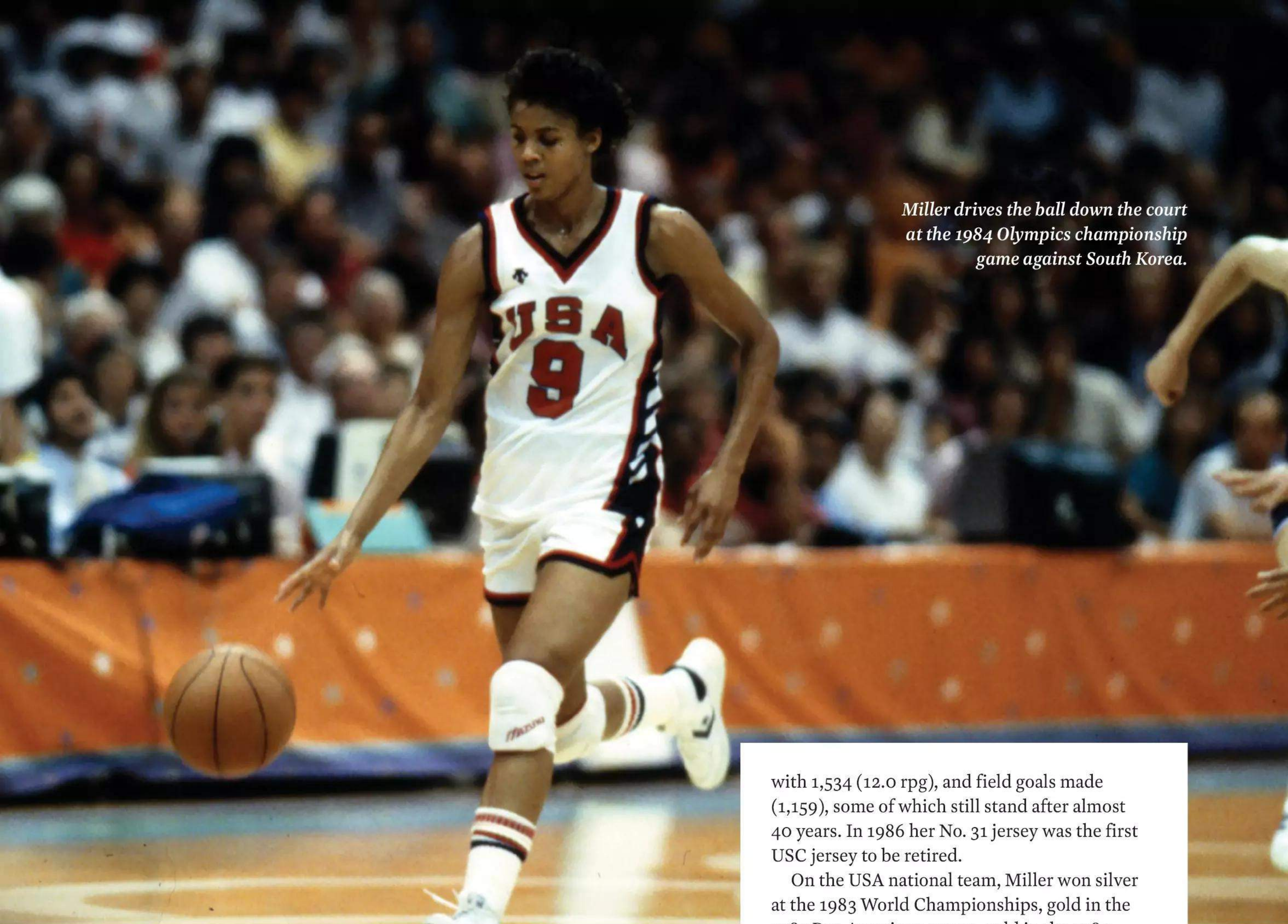
He went to France next, winning Ligue 1 twice in his two seasons with Paris Saint-Germain. Then, in 2023, the soccer legend announced he was coming to the U.S. to play for Inter Miami, the worst team in Major League Soccer. It wasn't just the move that was stunning, but the size and scope of the deal. In addition to more than \$20 million a year, Messi was granted an ownership stake in the team upon retirement and an unprecedented cut of revenues earned by a league media partner—in this case, Apple. It was a deal that not only reflected Messi's undiminished talent on the field but also set a new standard for athlete leverage and empowerment.

Inter Miami won the Leagues Cup in 2023. On May 4, 2024, Messi broke two MLS records: most assists (5) and most goal contributions (6) in a single game. —with Sean Gregory

▶ **AWARDS & HONORS** 17-time FIFA FIFPRO World 11 ▶ FIFA World Player of the Year 2009 ▶ Six-time World Soccer Player of the Year ▶ TIME 100 Most Influential People 2011, 2012, 2023 ▶ Eight-time ESPN Best Forward ▶ Copa América Best Player 2015, 2021 ▶ The Best FIFA Men's Player 2019, 2022, 2023 ▶ Ballon d'Or Dream Team 2020 ▶ Laureus World Sportsman of the Year 2020, 2023 ▶ TIME Athlete of the Year 2023



Messi after scoring the game-winning goal against Cruz Azul during the 2023 Leagues Cup group stage.



Miller drives the ball down the court at the 1984 Olympics championship game against South Korea.

CHERYL MILLER

/ BASKETBALL

B. 1964 | In 1982, a high school senior from Riverside Polytechnic High School, in Riverside, California, scored 105 points in a basketball game against neighboring Norte Vista High School. Her name was Cheryl Miller, and she would go on to have a stellar career at the University of Southern California, become a four-time All-American, win a gold medal in the Olympics, and grace the airwaves as a sportscaster. She is widely credited in helping draw attention to women's basketball in the 1980s.

The 6-foot, 2-inch forward led USC to a 112-20 record and championship titles in 1983 and 1984. Her senior year, *Sports Illustrated* named her best college basketball player of the year, male or female. She set numerous records as a Trojan, including career points with 3,018 (23.6 ppg), career rebounds

with 1,534 (12.0 rpg), and field goals made (1,159), some of which still stand after almost 40 years. In 1986 her No. 31 jersey was the first USC jersey to be retired.

On the USA national team, Miller won silver at the 1983 World Championships, gold in the 1983 Pan American games, gold in the 1984 Jones Cup, gold in the 1984 Summer Olympics, and golds in the 1986 Goodwill Games and World Championships.

In 1993, Miller returned to USC as head coach. During her two years there, the Trojans went 44-14 and won the 1994 Pac-10 conference title. In 1995, she left USC to become an NBA analyst for a number of outlets. Miller became the first female analyst to call a nationally televised NBA game in a matchup between the Los Angeles Clippers and Miami Heat in 1996. In an interview with the *Washington Post* before the game, she said that she did not consider herself a pioneer for female broadcasters, "It's not my intent to fly in with a red cape and change everyone's mentality," she told the paper.

When the WNBA formed in 1996, Miller picked up her clipboard again as head coach and general manager of the Phoenix Mercury. She left Phoenix for the broadcast booth in 2000. In 2014, she took the head coach position at Langston University in Oklahoma; two years later, she went to Cal State, where she coached until 2019.

AWARDS & HONORS Honda Sports Award 1984, 1985 > WBCA Player of the Year 1984, 1985 > Honda-Broderick Cup 1984 > Naismith Player of the Year 1984, 1985, 1986 > Wade Trophy 1985 > International Women's Sports Hall of Fame > FIBA Hall of Fame

JOE MONTANA

/FOOTBALL

B. 1956 | The 49ers had traded away their first-round draft pick in 1979 for O.J. Simpson, and they used their second pick to take UCLA running back James Owens. With their third pick, 82nd overall, they took a chance on the Notre Dame quarterback with a supposedly mediocre arm and reputedly troublesome attitude. His name was Joe Montana.

Montana grew up in the mining town of Monongahela, Pennsylvania. When he got to Notre Dame, he was seventh-string, but by his senior year he was a legend. Battling bitterly cold conditions and the Houston Cougars in the 1979 Cotton Bowl, he gulped down two cans of chicken soup to lead his team to a thoroughly ecumenical comeback victory.

Montana's NFL highlight reel began in 1980 when he rallied the 49ers from a 35-7 halftime deficit to a 38-35 overtime victory over the New Orleans Saints. In the 1981 NFC championship game, the 49ers beat Dallas 28-27 on a last-minute touchdown drive that culminated in football's The Catch—a 6-yard pass to wide receiver Dwight Clark at the back of the end zone. The 49ers won four Super Bowls with Montana in the 1980s, and he was named Super Bowl MVP three times. After he was traded to the Chiefs in April 1993, Montana added to his legend by leading them to stirring playoff victories over Pittsburgh and Houston. The tiny town of Ismay, Montana (population 22), even changed its name to Joe.

There are the seemingly dozens of two-minute drills in which Montana led the 49ers and then the Chiefs down the field to victory. Wayne Walker, the 49ers broadcaster, once described Montana as “cooler than the other side of the pillow,” and it was that grace and ingenuity under pressure, not his arm or his running ability, that made Montana one of the finest quarterbacks of all time. What made him even more celebrated was that he was never expected to be all that good. —with Steve Wulf

Montana drops back to pass during the Super Bowl game against the Cincinnati Bengals in 1989.



► AWARDS & HONORS First-team All-Pro 1987, 1989, 1990 > NFL MVP 1989, 1990 > AP Athlete of the Year 1989, 1990 > NFL Offensive Player of the Year 1989 > Bert Bell Award 1989 > *Sports Illustrated* Sportsman of the Year 1990 > Eight Pro Bowls > NFL 1980s All-Decade Team > NFL 75th Anniversary All-Time Team > NFL 100th Anniversary All-Time Team > San Francisco 49ers Hall of Fame > San Francisco 49ers No. 16 retired > Pro Football Hall of Fame

EDWIN MOSES

/TRACK & FIELD

B. 1955 | Ohio native Edwin Moses is a two-time Olympic gold medalist in the 400-meter hurdles and set the event's record four times. His unprecedented run of 122 straight wins between 1977 and 1987 still stands. You might recognize him from the Wheaties box or the Olympics coverage in 1976, 1984, or 1988, but what you might not know is that Moses is a really smart guy who pioneered reform movements in athletic eligibility and drug testing.

Born in Dayton, Ohio, Moses attended Morehouse College in Atlanta on an academic scholarship, majoring in physics and engineering. Morehouse didn't have its own track, so he practiced at local high schools, perfecting his form. Most hurdlers take 15 strides between hurdles, but Moses, who clocked in at at 6-feet, 2-inches tall, did it in 13.

In the 1976 Olympics in Montreal, Moses and teammate Mike Shrine nabbed the gold and silver medals in an event that had previously not had a glamorous tradition or identity. The boycott of the 1980 Olympics in Moscow prevented Moses from winning what would most likely have been his second gold, so he trained for a chance in 1984.

In between, he briefly designed weapons systems for the Navy, but left that position to train and

develop a plan to help elite athletes benefit from funding and commercial endorsements without jeopardizing their Olympic eligibility, which was ratified by the International Olympic Committee in 1981. Without this funding, many athletes in lower-profile sports would not be able to afford to train.

In the Los Angeles Olympics in 1984, Moses was chosen to take the Athlete's Oath and won his second gold. At this point, his winning streak was 102 races, and he had posted 18 of the best 20 times ever. At the Seoul Olympics in 1988, he took home a bronze.

Moses also put his engineering degree to work, participating in the development of the world's first random, out-of-competition drug testing program that would eventually become the World Anti-Doping Agency. "I look at track from an artistic as well as a business point of view. It's more than just a sport. It's my life," he told TIME in 1984.

▶ AWARDS & HONORS *Track & Field News Athlete of the Year 1980* ▶ *Jesse Owens Award 1981* ▶ *James E. Sullivan Award 1983* ▶ *ABC Wide World of Sports Athlete of the Year 1984* ▶ *Sports Illustrated Sportsman of the Year 1984*



Moses training for the hurdles at Pepperdine University in 1981.

RAFAEL NADAL

/TENNIS

B. 1986 | Raised on the island of Majorca, Rafael Nadal has athleticism in his blood. His uncle Miguel Angel, dubbed *el Carnicero* (the Butcher), was a bruising defender on Spain's national soccer team. Another uncle, Toni, was Nadal's first coach, who taught the natural righty to play tennis left-handed.

The King of Clay has won a record 14 French Opens and 22 Grand Slam men's singles titles. He is one of only a handful of players to have achieved a career Golden Slam, winning all four majors and an Olympic gold, and one of just two men (with Andre Agassi) to have achieved a career Golden Slam in both singles and doubles. As one of tennis' Big Three (with legends Roger Federer and Novak Djokovic), Nadal helped revive interest in pro tennis.

Although Nadal was born into an affluent family and experienced success at an early age, he has not fallen prey to ego or entitlement. His personal brand, if there were to be one, would be based on humility, perseverance, and generosity.

In 2010, Nadal founded Fundación RafaNadal, to provide kids opportunities to reach their potential through sports and education. It includes education centers in vulnerable areas in Spain, an educational tennis school in India, and programs for young athletes with intellectual disabilities. When Majorca was devastated by a flood in

October 2018, Nadal opened his tennis academy as a shelter for the victims, worked personally on the cleanup effort, donated €1 million, and organized charity benefits to help repair the damage.

In 2020, Nadal paired with fellow Spaniard and former NBA player Pau Gasol to raise €14 million to help people suffering from COVID-19. The same year, French sports broadcaster Nelson Monfort said of Nadal, "Every time I've asked him for charity actions, he said yes," and relayed a story about how after a match, out of view of the cameras, Nadal gave a sick child his bag.

In 2009 and 2022, Nadal was on the TIME 100, a list of the most influential people in the world.

▶ AWARDS & HONORS Five-time ITF World Champion
▶ Five-time ATP Player of the Year ▶ Five Stefan Edberg Sportsmanship Awards ▶ Laureus World Sports Award for Breakthrough of the Year 2006
▶ BBC World Sport Star of the Year 2010 ▶ Laureus World Sports Award for Sportsman of the Year 2011, 2021 ▶ ATP Arthur Ashe Humanitarian of the Year 2011 ▶ Laureus World Sports Award for Comeback of the Year 2014 ▶ ATP Fans' Favourite Award 2022

Nadal celebrates after winning a point against Argentina's Diego Schwartzman at the 2020 French Open in Paris.





Navratilova during the 1987 French Open Women's singles semifinals match against Chris Evert in Paris.

MARTINA NAVRATILOVA

/TENNIS

B. 1956 | Born in Prague, Martina Navratilova wanted to conquer the tennis world, and she knew she had a better shot at doing that in the U.S. than in communist Czechoslovakia. “The [Czech] tennis federation did not let me play the tournaments I wanted to play,” she told TIME, noting that it routinely denied her visas to tournaments in the West. So during the 1975 U.S. Open, American authorities helped her defect, the Czech government subsequently stripped her of her citizenship, and she went on to dominate women's tennis, winning 18 Grand Slam singles titles.

She retired in 2006, and still holds the record for career titles (167), consecutive Wimbledon singles titles (6) and Grand Slam doubles titles (31). Her unprecedented off-court training program and dietary regimen raised the bar across the sport and helped her bring down barriers of ageism. In 2003 she became the oldest-ever Grand Slam

champion by winning the women's doubles at Wimbledon when she was 46.

Known for her outspokenness, Navratilova is an activist for gay rights. In a 1981 interview with the *New York Daily News*, she revealed that she was bisexual. She asked the paper to hold off on publishing the story until she was comfortable with coming out, but they published it anyway. (She has since reidentified herself a homosexual.)

Navratilova lent her star power to a lawsuit opposed to Colorado's anti-gay legislation known as Amendment 2—later ruled unconstitutional by the Supreme Court—and in 1993, she spoke at the March on Washington for Lesbian, Gay and Bi Equal Rights and Liberation. In 2000, she received the National Equality Award from the Human Rights Campaign. She was in the first class of inductees into the National Gay and Lesbian Sports Hall of Fame in 2013.

Navratilova frequently shares her opinions on social media, accepting the blowback as it comes. A recent one that sparked offense: She does not believe that elite transgender female athletes should have transition surgery before they are allowed to compete in women's sports. She remains unfazed by her critics. As she told the *New York Times* in 2022, “I lived behind the Iron Curtain. You really think you are going to be able to tell me to keep my mouth shut?” —with William Lee Adams

▶ AWARDS & HONORS Seven-time WTA Player of the Year ▶ Six-time ITF World Champion
▶ AP Female Athlete of the Year 1983, 1984 ▶ BBC Sports Personality of the Year Lifetime Achievement Award 2003 ▶ Czech Sport Legend Award 2006 ▶ Philippe Chatrier Award 2009

Nicklaus hits one out of the bunker during the 1986 Masters Tournament in Augusta, Georgia.



JACK NICKLAUS

/GOLF

B. 1940 | The year was 1962. A 22-year-old from Columbus, Ohio, named Jack Nicklaus shambled across the 18th green like a young grizzly bear, his face ruddy from the sun, his white cotton shirt soggy with sweat, his cream-colored cap perched precariously on the back of his close-cropped blond head. Intently, impassively, he hunched over his 2-foot putt. Daintily, deliberately, he stroked the ball toward the hole. When it plunked safely into the cup, he permitted himself a change of expression—a boyish grin and tip of his cap to the crowd. With that putt, the first-year pro won one of the biggest golf tournaments of them all: the U.S. Open.

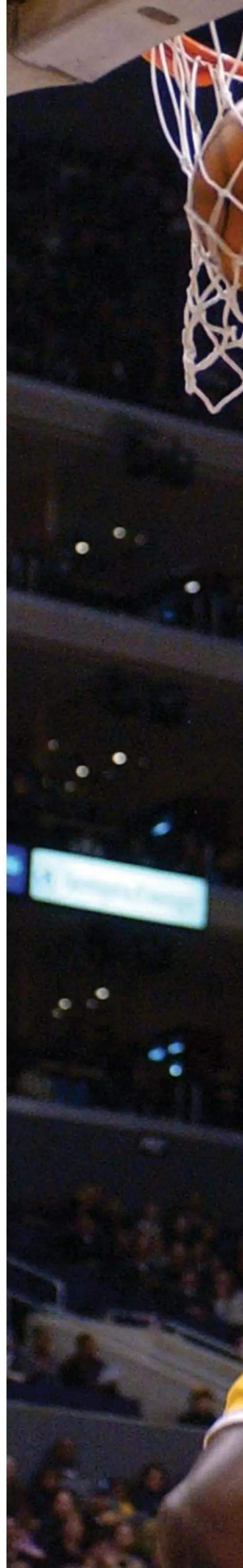
That kid would go on to win a record 18 major championships—six Masters, five PGA Championships, four U.S. Opens, three Open Championships—more than Tiger Woods. For a record 24 straight seasons (1960 to 1983), Nicklaus made at least one top ten finish in a major championship. Nicklaus played his last major in 2005 after having racked up 117 professional wins over four decades.

Today, Nicklaus and his four sons own a golf course design company, Nicklaus Designs. To date, they have designed more than 425 courses in more

than 45 countries with the goal of creating enjoyable and challenging play, regardless of skill level. One course, Muirfield Village Golf Club in Dublin, Ohio, a suburb of Columbus, hosts the Memorial Tournament, which Nicklaus funds and hosts. The annual benefit tournament honors those who have distinguished themselves in the sport and raises money for various charities. Since its inception in 1976, the Memorial has raised over \$52 million in donations to charity, with nearly \$37 million going to children's hospital causes.

Nicklaus and his wife, Barbara, established the Nicklaus Children's Health Care Foundation in 1984, helping children and families around the world get access to state-of-the-art pediatric healthcare.

▶ AWARDS & HONORS Five-time PGA Player of the Year > *Sports Illustrated* Greatest Golfer of All Time > *Golf* Golfer of the Century > *Golf Monthly* Golfer of the Century > PGA Tour Lifetime Achievement Award > World Golf Hall of Fame > PGA Hall of Fame > Presidential Medal of Freedom > Congressional Gold Medal





Shaq dunks during a home game against the Phoenix Suns in 2002.

SHAQUILLE O'NEAL

/BASKETBALL

B. 1972 | On the court, Shaq defied all logic. He was a mountain who never kept himself in tip-top shape. During his days in Los Angeles, where he and Kobe Bryant were tension-filled teammates who led the Lakers to three straight championships, Bryant once called him “fat.” Physics dictates that Shaq should not have lasted in the NBA almost 20 years.

But O’Neal stuck around for 19 seasons, and piled up 28,596 career points—ninth all-time, and 13,099 rebounds (15th ranked)—and was, when he retired at 39, the oldest player in the league. He hit 58.2% of his shots, the third highest rate of all-time. Yes, the last few seasons weren’t pretty—from 2009 to 2011, he bounced from Phoenix to Cleveland to Boston before retiring.

Known for his Yogi Berra-style one-liners and clever catchphrases (in Phoenix, he dubbed himself “The Big Cactus”), O’Neal was once the most dominant force in basketball. He was the top overall pick in the 1992 draft, and as a rookie with the Orlando Magic, he averaged 23.4 points and 13.9 rebounds. The NBA hadn’t seen anything like him in years. Shaq was strong enough to dislodge a backboard stanchion—he did that once in New Jersey, pulling the entire hoop contraption to the floor—yet dexterous around the basket. His moves weren’t artful, yet he was clever enough that you had to guard him, and 7-foot, 2-inch, 325-pound guys are tough to guard. —with Sean Gregory

▶ AWARDS & HONORS Olympic Gold Medal 1996 ▶ NBA champion 2000, 2001, 2002, 2006 ▶ NBA Finals MVP 2000, 2001, 2002 ▶ NBA MVP 2000 ▶ 15-time NBA All-Star ▶ NBA All-Star Game MVP 2000, 2004, 2009 ▶ Eight-time All-NBA First Team ▶ 50th & 75th NBA Anniversary Teams ▶ Los Angeles Lakers No. 34 retired ▶ Miami Heat No. 32 retired ▶ Orlando Magic No. 32 retired ▶ Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame ▶ College Basketball Hall of Fame ▶ FIBA Hall of Fame

JESSE OWENS

/TRACK & FIELD

1913-1980 | He was a superlative athlete, but that was almost incidental to the role he came to play in history. He happened to be Black, and his timing was perfect. Thus James Cleveland (“Jesse”) Owens became forever a symbol of the triumph of the individual over man’s more malevolent impulses. At the 1936 Olympics in Berlin, which Adolf Hitler hoped would be a showcase of Aryan supremacy, Owens won four gold medals in track and field events. The sight of the graceful American’s soaring victory in the long jump and his Olympic-record wins in the 100-meter and 200-meter dashes and 4 x 100-meter relay put the lie to *der Führer*’s simplistic myths about race.

While Owens’ performance vindicated his own belief that the Olympics should not be suborned by politics, it was, of course, played as a political triumph by the foes of Nazism. Almost forgotten is the fact that two Jewish sprinters who had qualified for the U.S. 4 x 100-meter relay team were not

allowed to compete. And as Owens later noted, “When I came back to my native country, I couldn’t ride in the front of the bus. I had to go in the back door. I couldn’t live where I wanted. Now what’s the difference?”

On the field, the difference was his skill. At a meet a year before the Games, while a student at Ohio State, Owens broke three world marks and tied another in just 45 minutes of competition. His times in the 100- and 200-meter dashes in Berlin still would have won Olympic medals as late as 1964.

The son of an Alabama tenant farmer, Owens was a schoolboy track star in Cleveland. He worked his way through Ohio State as an elevator operator. A gifted speaker, he eventually became a lecturer after retiring and headed his own Phoenix public relations firm. Until his death in 1980, he served, appropriately, as the State Department’s “Ambassador to Sports.”

AWARDS & HONORS

AP Athlete of the Year
1936 > Silver Olympic
Order 1976 > Library of
Congress Living Legend
Award 1979 > U.S.
Olympic Hall of Fame >
Presidential Medal of
Freedom > Congressional
Gold Medal > Two U.S.
Postage Stamps



Owens winning the 100-meter sprint
at the 1936 Olympics in Berlin.



Pelé celebrating a NASL quarterfinal victory over the Fort Lauderdale Strikers in 1977, his final season.

PELÉ

/ SOCCER

1940-2022 | Brazil has had its dictators and detractors, but they did not raise the passions that its heroes did. In 1970, when Brazil defeated Italy 4-1 to win the World Cup in Mexico City, the country erupted in what *Jornal do Brasil* bannered as “The Biggest Carnaval in History.”

Empty streets filled with honking processions of cars, samba bands, and conga dancers who happily chanted “Bra—zil! Bra—zil! Bra—zil!” In Rio, fireworks exploded in the evening sky, while air-force jets trailing plumes of smoke swooped low over Copacabana Beach.

The center of much of the fuss was Brazil’s No. 1 hero, Edson Arantes do Nascimento, better known as Pelé. The star of Brazil’s Santos team was one of the most successful and popular sports figures of the 20th century. Then 29, he had played on all three of Brazil’s world-championship teams, a feat that made

him a national idol in a land where *futebol* is revered and was a welcome escape from ongoing political turmoil. Pelé scored one goal and set up two in the 1970 victory over Italy. Brazil, as a three-time winner, gained permanent possession of the cup, although, of course, the quadrennial tournaments continued.

Mobbed by well-wishers at the airport in Brasilia, the country’s capital, Pelé told the crowd that the cup victory was “the greatest moment of my life.” He believed it, and so did the fans, who delighted in his every triumph. The victory gave the Brazilians a chance to resort to their natural safety valve: the Carnaval. This spontaneous outburst, as Brazilian psychologists have observed, gave the torn and fragmented nation an opportunity to coalesce in a common cause and experience a common joy. So did Pelé.

Following the win, Brazil’s president, retired Army Marshal Emilio Garrastazu Medici, who was usually withdrawn and formidable, declared a two-day holiday and played host to Pelé & Co. at a victory lunch in his palace.

▶ AWARDS & HONORS 11-time Campeonato Paulista Top Scorer ▶ World Team of the 20th Century ▶ World Soccer Greatest XI of All Time ▶ World Soccer Greatest Player of the 20th Century ▶ Reuters News Athlete of the Century ▶ IOC Athlete of the Century ▶ IFFHS World Player of the Century ▶ IFFHS South American Player of the Century ▶ FIFA Player of the Century ▶ Ballon d’Or Dream Team 2020

RICHARD PETTY

/AUTO RACING

B. 1937 | While Lee Petty, who won the first Daytona 500 in 1959, was an old-school stock-car racer, one of the backcountry leadfoots who learned their trade racing hot-rods around dusty country-fair horse tracks, his son Richard was new-school. Richard was one of the cool, engineer-minded youngsters who talked endlessly about “axle ratios” and “foot-pounds of torque” and bristled at any mention of the sport’s indecorous beginnings. “Why don’t people just forget about all that?” Petty complained to *TIME* in 1967. He didn’t smoke or drink, shunned sportswriters, photographers, and autograph seekers, and insisted: “If there is any glamour in this sport, I haven’t found it.” His fans would disagree.

To rival drivers, Petty was known as a “charger,” who liked to blast ahead, full-bore, from the start of a race, hoping opponents would overtax their engines trying to catch him. He was also an innovator; he invented the dangerous art of “drafting”—keeping his car practically on top of an opponent’s rear bumper, using the partial vacuum created by the other car as a tow, thus conserving his own engine and fuel. Unlike many drivers, who made a fetish of braking and shifting at precisely the same points each time around a track, Petty varied his routine: “I drive by feel,” he told *TIME*. “Sometimes I’ll go into a corner a full car length farther than at other times before braking or shifting.”

Petty was the first driver to win the Cup Series championship seven times; he won the Daytona 500 a record seven times; and, in 1967, he won a record 27 races in one season. In a long career that spanned from 1959 to 1993, Petty became one of the most accomplished drivers in NASCAR—he finished with the most wins (200), most poles (123), most consecutive wins (10), and most starts (1,185).

After he retired as a driver, Petty remained active in the sport. He is currently the team ambassador for Legacy Motor Club (formerly Richard Petty Motorsports). In 2004, the Petty family opened the Victory Junction camp in honor of Petty’s grandson, Adam Petty, who was killed in a racing accident at age 19. The camp gives children with health issues a chance to have fun in the outdoors.

► AWARDS & HONORS NASCAR Hall of Fame ► International Motorsports Hall of Fame ► NASCAR’s 50 Greatest Drivers ► Motorsports Hall of Fame of America ► Presidential Medal of Freedom



Petty sprays champagne after his 200th official win at the 1984 Firecracker 400 in Daytona Beach, Florida.



WALTER PAYTON

/FOOTBALL

1953-1999 | Chicago Bears running back Walter Payton, the teddy bear whose cloying nickname was “Sweetness,” is counted among the greats. When Payton passed rushing great Jim Brown in 1984 to become the leading rusher in league history (Payton retired with 16,726 career yards), Brown gave him a blessing: “Payton is a gladiator,” he said, “Walter follows the code.” During his 13 seasons with the Bears (1975-’87), Payton was all-around the most productive football player of the two-platoon era. “For most of his career, teams have been able to key on him alone,” then Dallas Cowboys defensive tackle John Dutton told TIME in 1986, “and still no one has stopped him.”

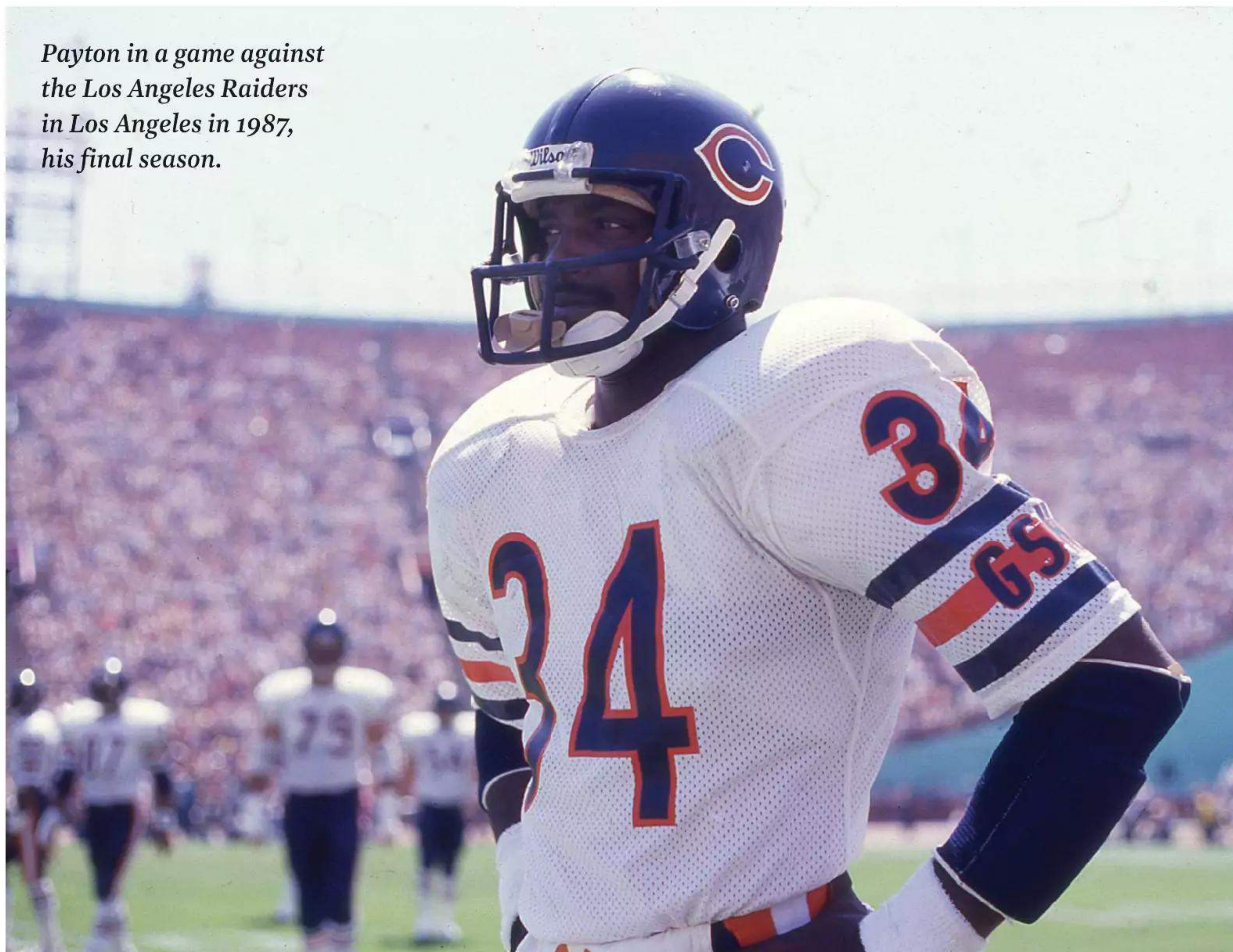
How Payton endured 13 seasons, physically and spiritually, is more than a wonder. In 1985, the year the Bears won the Super Bowl, he logged a record nine straight 100-yard running games and led the team in receptions. That year, after Chicago thrashed the Los Angeles Rams, 24-0, to take the National Conference championship, one Bear after another stopped by Payton’s locker just to touch him. “Eleven years of climbing that mountain,” he sighed, speaking not altogether figuratively. As a boy, he ran the hot

sandbanks by the Pearl River close to his home in Columbia, Mississippi, and as a man, he trained on a black dirt hill near his home in suburban Arlington Heights, Illinois. “I have to work harder every year,” he told TIME after the Super Bowl win. “Let’s put it this way, when I first started playing football, I didn’t use as much adhesive tape as I use now.”

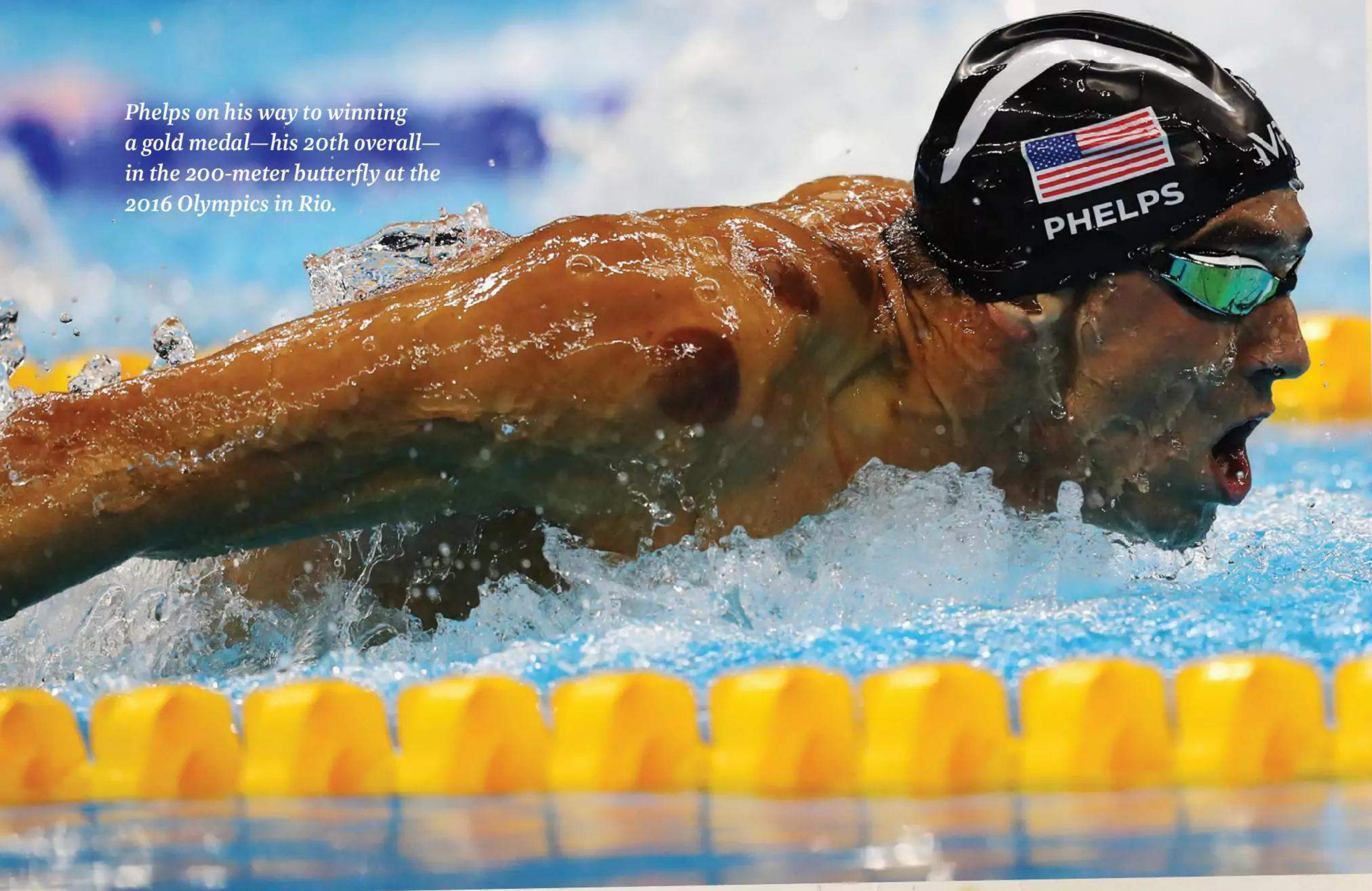
In addition to Payton’s star-studded stats, he was known for his philanthropy. He and his wife started the Walter and Connie Payton Foundation in the late 1980s, and he was actively involved in community service throughout his life. After Payton’s death in 1999, the NFL renamed their Man of the Year award, given to the player who exhibits excellence on and off the field, after him. —with Tom Callahan

▶ **AWARDS & HONORS** NFL MVP 1977
▶ NFL Offensive Player of the Year 1977 ▶ NFL Man of the Year 1977 ▶ Five-time First-team All-Pro ▶ Nine Pro Bowls ▶ Bert Bell Award 1985 ▶ NFL 75th Anniversary All-Time Team ▶ NFL 100th Anniversary All-Time Team ▶ Chicago Bears No. 34 retired ▶ Pro Football Hall of Fame ▶ College Football Hall of Fame

Payton in a game against the Los Angeles Raiders in Los Angeles in 1987, his final season.



Phelps on his way to winning a gold medal—his 20th overall—in the 200-meter butterfly at the 2016 Olympics in Rio.



MICHAEL PHELPS

/ SWIMMING

B.1985 | American swimmer Michael Phelps is the most decorated Olympian of all time. Of his 28 medals, 23 are golds. He won six gold medals in Athens in 2004, eight in Beijing in 2008, four in London in 2012, and five in Rio in 2016. When he retired in 2016, Phelps amassed more golds than 66 entire countries. He set 39 world records during his career.

To say Phelps was a phenom in the water would be an understatement. But what he did for mental health awareness after his retirement made an impact that cannot be measured with a stopwatch. He became one of the first high-profile athletes to talk about his struggles with it. He opened up about living with ADHD and depression, revealed he experienced suicidal thoughts, and encouraged people with mental health issues to get help. “Being an athlete you’re supposed to be this strong person who doesn’t have weaknesses, doesn’t have any problems. No, that’s wrong. I struggle through problems just like everybody else does. I wanted to open up and just talk about it. It is what makes me who I am,” he told *TIME* in 2018.

Phelps encourages other athletes to use their fame to support issues that matter to them. “For me, to

be able to have that power, to have people listen to you and to open up and speak about things that are important to me whether that is mental health or saving water; that’s amazing,” he says. “It’s pretty incredible to have that voice and be able to spread my message as loud as I can to get people to really open up, understand what is actually going on, and what we are doing to the world we live in, no matter what it is.”

After the 2008 Olympics, Phelps took a \$1 million bonus he received from Speedo to start the Michael Phelps Foundation. It promotes water safety, the sport of swimming, and mental health initiatives.
—with Alice Park

► **AWARDS & HONORS** Eight Swimming World World Swimmer of the Year Awards ► Seven-time Golden Goggle Male Athlete of the Year ► Five USOC SportsMan of the Year Awards ► James E. Sullivan Award 2003 ► *Sports Illustrated* Sportsman of the Year 2008 ► AP Athlete of the Year 2008, 2012 ► Golden Goggle Impact Award 2016 ► U.S. Olympic team flag bearer 2016 ► Morton E. Ruderman Award in Inclusion 2019

MEGAN RAPINOE

/SOCCER

B. 1985 | Megan Rapinoe, who played the bulk of her professional career with the Seattle Reign, is a two-time FIFA World Cup winner with the U.S. national women's team. She won the Golden Boot and Golden Ball awards at the 2019 FIFA Women's World Cup in France, and received the Ballon d'Or Féminin that season as best player. She is also an Olympic gold medalist: At the 2012 Olympics in London, she scored three goals. Her creative and joyful play helped elevate women's soccer to the status of appointment viewing.

Rapinoe is one of the most talked-about American athletes of our time, a symbol of excellence and a fearless competitor on and off the pitch.

More than a decade ago, she came out as gay, giving many other female sports figures permission to be more open about their sexuality. She has since worked tirelessly as an advocate for the LGBTQ+ community—she's the brightest athletic star currently leading a fight against the proliferation of U.S. state laws that ban transgender youth from playing on teams consistent with their gender identity. During

the 2019 World Cup, when Rapinoe was the target of severe political vitriol, she scored against France and struck a victorious pose as if in answer to her critics: She spread her arms wide and smiled warmly to the crowd.

In 2019, Rapinoe, along with the rest of the U.S. women's team, filed a gender-equity lawsuit against the U.S. Soccer Federation for equal pay. Female players around the world followed their example and waged pay fights against their federations. In 2022, the U.S. women's team achieved its goal: U.S. Soccer and the players' associations for the men's and women's teams announced a historic collective-bargaining agreement that will run through 2028.

In 2022, President Joe Biden awarded Rapinoe the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the country's highest civilian honor. She's the first soccer player so recognized.

Rapinoe, who retired in 2023, created a blueprint for female athletes: Tap into your truest self and demand what's yours. Lay waste to the notion of being agreeable. —with Sean Gregory

▶ AWARDS & HONORS

Algarve Cup MVP 2013

▶ FIFA Women's World Cup 2015, 2019 ▶ NWSL

Best XI 2018 ▶ IFFHS

World's Best Woman

Playmaker 2019 ▶ IFFHS

Women's World Team

2019 ▶ FIFPro World XI

2019, 2020 ▶ Sports

Illustrated Sportsperson

of the Year 2019 ▶ IFFHS

CONCACAF Woman Team

of the Decade ▶ TIME

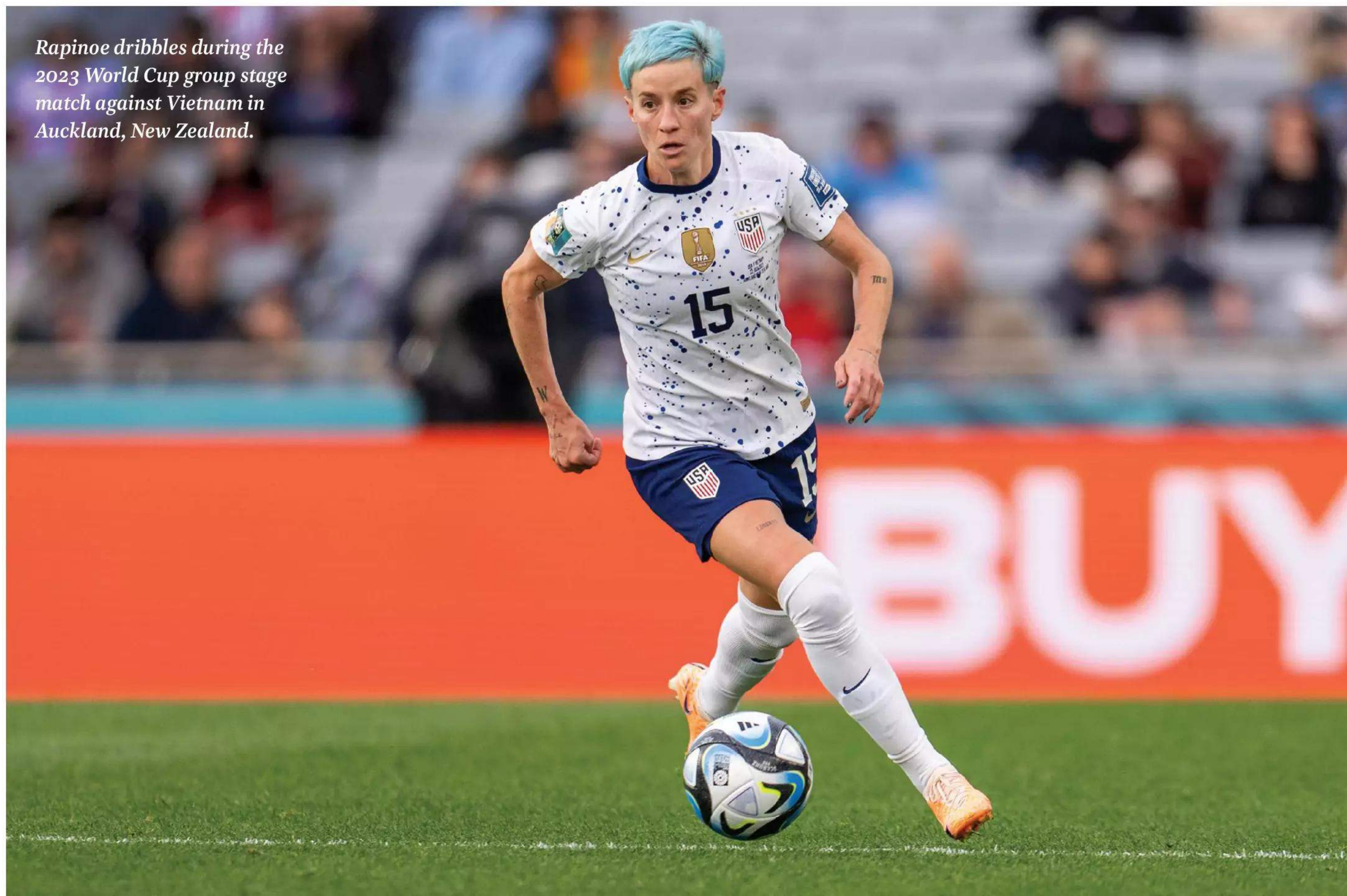
100 Most Influential

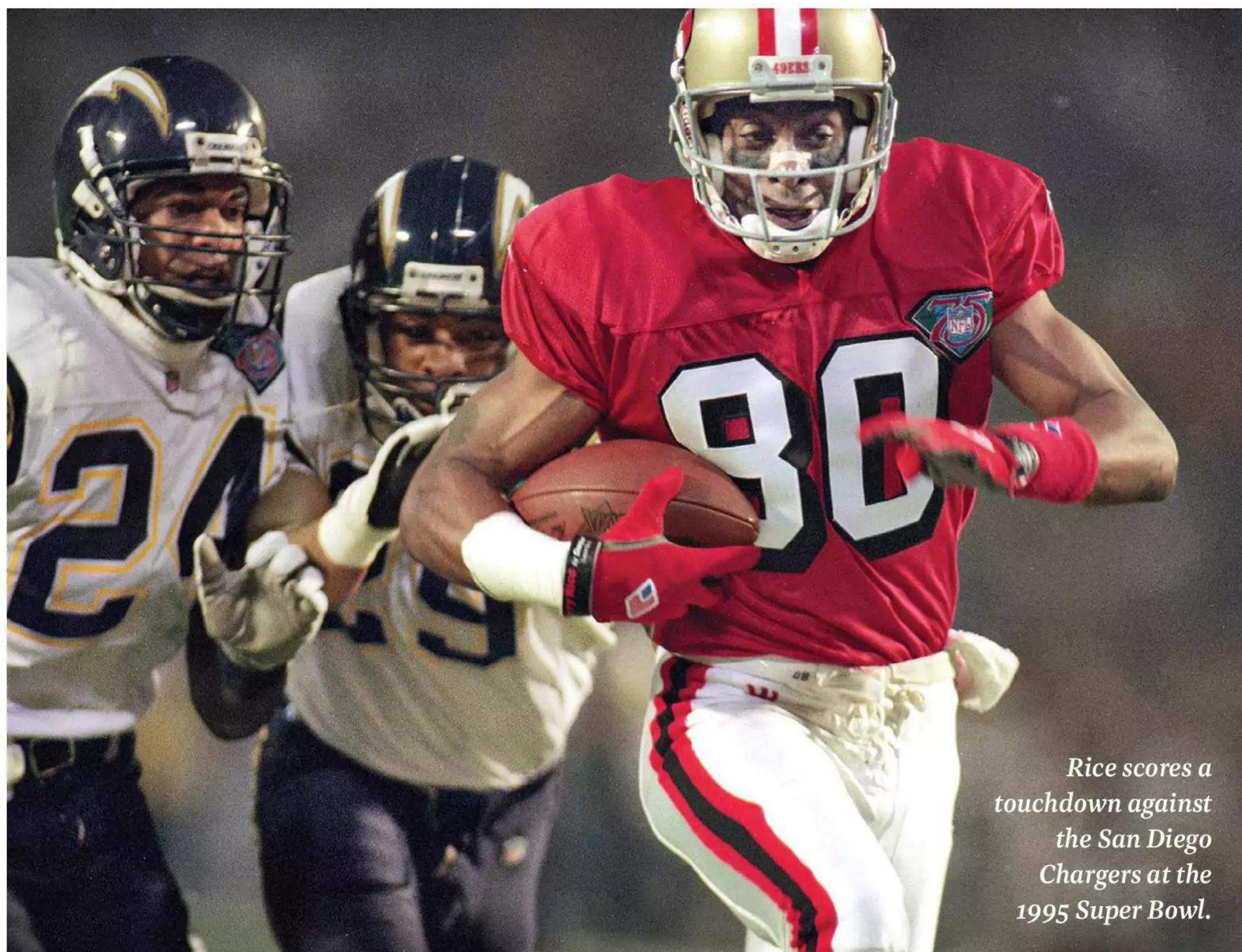
People 2020 ▶ National

Gay and Lesbian Sports

Hall of Fame

Rapinoe dribbles during the 2023 World Cup group stage match against Vietnam in Auckland, New Zealand.





Rice scores a touchdown against the San Diego Chargers at the 1995 Super Bowl.

JERRY RICE

/FOOTBALL

B. 1962 | Legend has it that former NFL wide receiver Jerry Rice was discovered by a high-school assistant principal who caught him skipping class—Rice ran away so fast, the principal advised the football coach to give him a spot on the team. The young Rice, who was the sixth of eight children and raised in tiny Crawford, Mississippi, often helped his bricklayer father on the job, carrying bricks up scaffolds.

Rice attended college at Mississippi Valley State. There, he teamed up with quarterback and fellow future college football hall-of-famer Willie Totten under the direction of coach Archie Cooley, aka “the Gunslinger,” whose innovative passing offense, known as the “Satellite Express” helped the duo set passing and receiving records. The underdogs routinely ran up scores against schools with more historically developed programs, catching the eye of pro scouts. By the end of his senior year, Rice, who was nicknamed “World” for his ability to catch anything that was thrown his way, set 18 NCAA receiving records and finished ninth in the Heisman Trophy balloting.

Rice signed with the San Francisco 49ers for the 1985-’86 season. Following a slow rookie start, Rice broke out the following year, and led the league in receiving yards and touchdown passes. The 49ers won the NFC West and made the playoffs. In 1987-’88, Rice led the league in receiving yards and TDs again, breaking the record of receiving touchdowns

in a single season: 22. Rice was named NFL Offensive Player of the Year, but the 49ers lost in the postseason.

The following season, the 49ers won the Super Bowl against Cincinnati —Rice’s 11 receptions and 215 receiving yards set Super Bowl records, and he was named Super Bowl MVP. In 1989-’90, the 49ers clinched the NFL championship again, this time against the Broncos, 55-10. In 1994-’95, the 49ers clinched one more Super Bowl win against the San Diego Chargers, 49-26. Rice, playing with a separated shoulder for part of the game, caught 10 passes, racked up 149 yards, and scored three touchdowns.

Rice signed with the Oakland Raiders in 2001, and the following season, he scored his 200th career touchdown and the Raiders made the Super Bowl but lost to the Tampa Bay Buccaneers. After being traded to Seattle in 2004, Rice retired in 2005 after an impressive 20 seasons in the NFL.

▶ AWARDS & HONORS Six-time NFL receiving yards leader > Six-time NFL receiving touchdowns leader > Bert Bell Award 1987 > NFL receptions leader 1990, 1996 > 13 Pro Bowls > 10-time First-team All-Pro > NFL All-Decade Team 1980s, 1990s > NFL 75th Anniversary Team > NFL 100th Anniversary Team > College Football Hall of Fame > San Francisco 49ers No. 80 retired > San Francisco 49ers Hall of Fame > Pro Football Hall of Fame

Retton performs on the balance beam at the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles.



MARY LOU RETTON

/GYMNASTICS

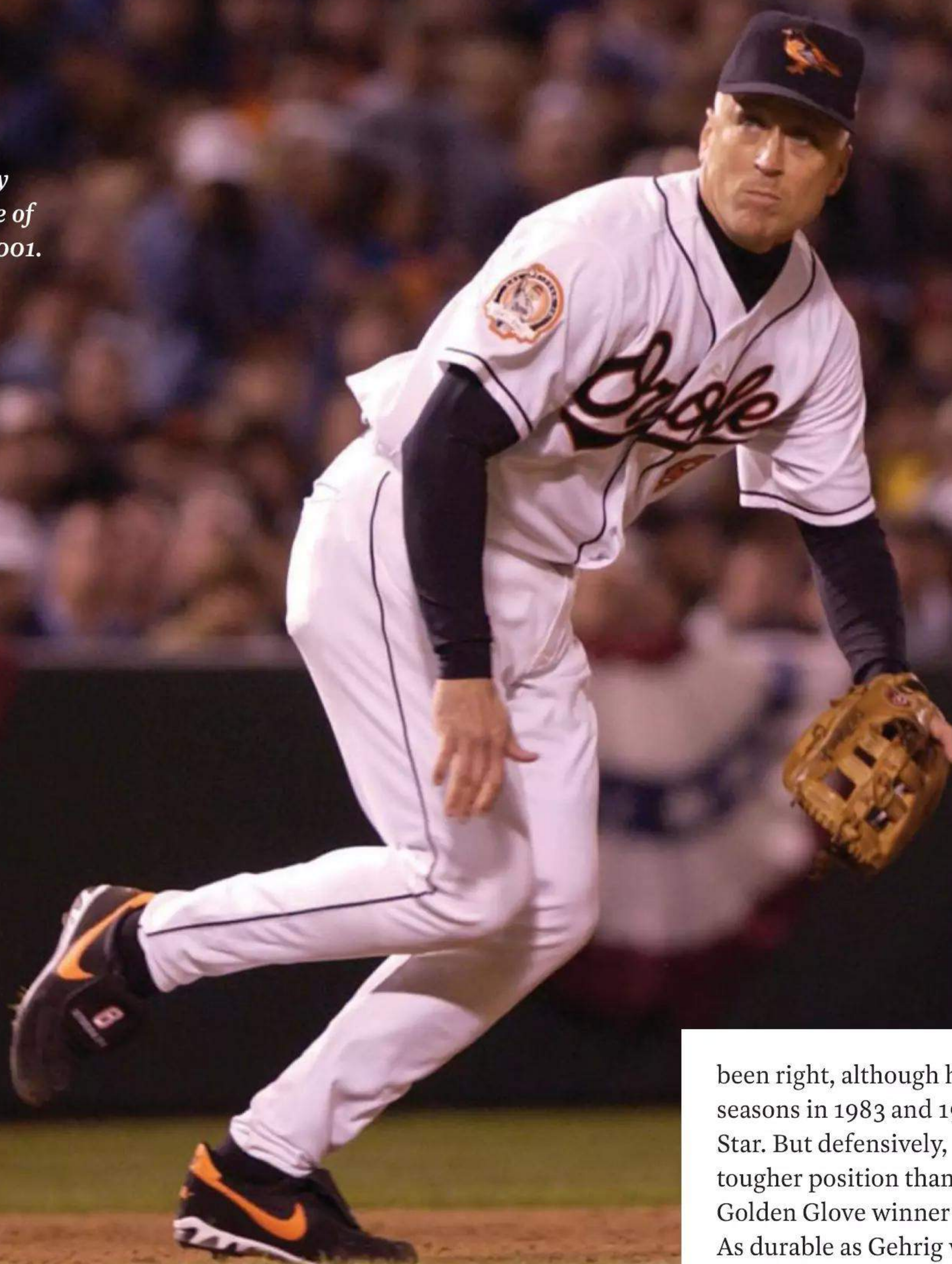
B. 1968 | The night before the finals in women's gymnastics at the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles, Mary Lou Retton, then 16, lay in bed at the Olympic Village, conjuring. It was an established ritual for her, no different from the imaginings of a hundred other nights. "I imagine all the moves and go through them with the image in my mind," Retton told *TIME* shortly after the Games. The following day, Retton led the U.S. team through a stylish and rousing high-flying performance. The Americans could not quite match the lavishly talented and seasoned Romanian team, but their second-place finish won them a silver medal. It was the first team medal ever won by the U.S. in a women's international gymnastics competition.

But as they left the arena, Retton had sneaked a close look at the Romanians' medals, and told U.S. Women's Coach Don Peters, "Theirs are shinier than ours." Two nights later, everything that glittered was around Retton's neck. She became the first U.S. gymnast to win the gold medal in the all-around championship, the most coveted prize in gymnastics that marks the winner as the finest gymnast in the world. Retton sealed her claim to it in the most dramatic duel in the history of the sport, winning by performing a perfect 10 in her final event, the vault—not once but twice. A lesser score would have meant defeat, or at best a tie. But while the nation held its breath, she flew off the vault and into gymnastics history.

Retton seemed fated for gymnastics since she was a toddler in Fairmont, West Virginia. "I was one of those hyper kids, always jumping up and down on the couch and breaking things," she told *TIME*. In a move of self-preservation, her parents sent her off to an acrobatics class. By age 14, Retton knew she could strike for the first rank if she could find the right coach. Conveniently, legendary coach Béla Károlyi and his wife had just defected from the Romanian team on a world tour, and the match was made. —
with B.J. Phillips

▶ AWARDS & HONORS World Cup All-Around Gold 1983, 1984, 1985 > *Sports Illustrated* Sportswoman of the Year 1984 > American Academy of Achievement Golden Plate Award 1985 > National Italian American Sports Hall of Fame > Houston Sports Hall of Fame > U.S. Olympic Hall of Fame > International Gymnastics Hall of Fame

Ripken makes a play during the last game of his MLB career in 2001.



CAL RIPKEN JR.

/ BASEBALL

B. 1960 | On September 6, 1995, Baltimore Oriole Cal Ripken Jr. played his 2,131st straight game and broke the record for consecutive games played set by Lou Gehrig, the first baseman for the New York Yankees from 1925 until 1939. The Streak, as it has come to be called, officially began on May 30, 1982, when Orioles manager Earl Weaver started the 21-year-old Ripken at third base. The following season, Ripken shifted to shortstop.

Ripken never set out to eclipse the “Iron Horse,” who he modestly and somewhat mistakenly believed was a much better ballplayer than himself. “I’m not even in Gehrig’s league,” Ripken told *TIME* in 1999. Offensively speaking, Ripken may have

been right, although he had two MVP Gehrigian seasons in 1983 and 1991, and was a 19-time All-Star. But defensively, Ripken played a much tougher position than Gehrig did, and the two-time Golden Glove winner did a much better job of it. As durable as Gehrig was, he played every inning of every game for only one season; at one point, Ripken played 8,243 consecutive innings. While Gehrig occasionally resorted to artifice to extend his streak, Ripken never did. Gehrig was literally afraid of leaving the lineup; Ripken was in it for the fun. “There’s a joy to Cal’s game that never ceases to amaze me,” Mike Flanagan, the Orioles’ pitching coach who played for Cal Sr. and played with Cal Jr., told *TIME*. “People who think he’s out for glory just don’t get it.” Indeed, fans who thought Ripken would sit down shortly after No. 2,131 were mistaken. He eventually sat out in 1998—after 2,632 consecutive games.

There were times in which Ripken seemed not just a throwback but the last true sports hero. He carried the requisite superstar salary but almost none of the other baggage that has come to be associated with the modern-day professional athlete. He didn’t sulk, mangle, strut, or refer to himself in the third person. He turned down several opportunities to become a free agent, preferring to remain an Oriole and a Baltimorean. He had endorsements, to be sure, but his most famous one was for milk. —with Steve Wulf

AWARDS & HONORS World Series Champion 1983 > Eight-time Silver Slugger > Roberto Clemente Award 1992 > Baltimore Orioles No. 8 retired > Baltimore Orioles Hall of Fame > Major League Baseball All-Century Team > National Baseball Hall of Fame

MARIANO RIVERA

/ BASEBALL

B. 1969 | A closer could never be considered the Roger Federer of baseball—it's just not a role that allows enough overall contribution to fully justify that comparison. But New York Yankee Mariano Rivera was certainly the Federer of closers—and for far longer than Federer was the Federer of tennis. It's as if Rivera's failures, however brief or small, signified some sort of cosmic shift. He was perfect so often that imperfection from him seemed unnatural. Nearly every summer, Rivera went through a stretch where he blew a couple of saves in a week, almost as though he were a pitching machine that had to briefly recalibrate before launching headlong into the final months of the season. And every time, commentators would wonder aloud, "Is this the end for Mo Rivera?" Each time that question was asked, the answer was the same. Between 2003 and 2013, Rivera finished just one season with an ERA above 2.16 or fewer than 30 saves.

The sense of finality when Metallica's "Enter Sandman" began blasting from the Yankee Stadium loudspeakers and No. 42 emerged from the bullpen has never gone away. Rivera was always a constant in a game defined by inconsistency. His signature cutter broke so many bats that that hitters were known to use their batting practice bats against him rather than risking their good gamers.

In 2013, Rivera, who grew up in a Panamanian fishing village, finished his 17-season career with the Yankees a 13-time All-Star and five-time World Series Champion. Over a decade later, he is still MLB's career leader in saves (652) and games finished (952).

A week before his final appearance, Rivera, who wore Jackie Robinson's number, 42, participated in a pre-game ceremony, surrounded by Yankee luminaries and members of Robinson's family, in which the team officially retired the number. Rivera was the first active Yankee to receive the honor. He also was the last major league player ever to wear 42; Rivera was in his second season in 1997 when the league retired 42 across the sport, but it allowed those wearing it to continue to do so until they left baseball. —with Eric Dodds

AWARDS & HONORS World Series MVP 1999 > ACLS MVP 2003 > Five AL Rolaids Relief Man Awards > Delivery Man of the Year 2005, 2006, 2009 > AL Comeback Player of the Year 2013 > MLB Saves Leader 1999, 2001, 2004 > ROBIE Humanitarian Award > Jefferson Award for Public Service > Presidential Medal of Freedom > National Baseball Hall of Fame

Rivera after winning Game 5 of the 2000 World Series over the New York Mets.



JACKIE ROBINSON

/ BASEBALL

1919-1972 | When Jackie Robinson died in 1972, there were Black baseball players, many of them top stars, on every team in the majors. Their very presence was a memorial to the man who, 27 years before, agreed to take part in Brooklyn Dodgers' boss Branch Rickey's "noble experiment" to break the color barrier in major league baseball.

As a four-sport star at UCLA, Robinson was a belligerent competitor who always prided himself on "reacting spiritedly when insulted or scorned." The toughest task of his career, he once recalled, was learning "to conquer and control myself."

When Robinson joined the Dodgers, Rickey had to chew out some members of the team for organizing a ban-the-Black petition. National League President Ford Frick had to throw down a tough play-or-else edict to squash a proposed boycott of the Dodgers by a group of St. Louis Cardinals. On the field, though, race-baiting continued unabated, notably by the Philadelphia Phillies and their manager Ben Chapman. Once, when Robinson seemed ready to storm the Philadelphia bench, Dodger shortstop Pee Wee Reese, Robinson's closest friend on the team, silenced Chapman by challenging him to "take on somebody who can fight back."

In the field, Robinson was frequently spiked; at bat, he had the dubious distinction of being hit by beanballing pitchers more times than any other player in the league. Through it all, though, he kept his temper and helped lead the Dodgers to the 1947 pennant with a team-high batting average of .297. He quieted his critics with a display of clutch hitting, bunting, slick fielding, and flashy base running that won him Rookie-of-the-Year honors.

Though his batting average across 10 seasons with the Dodgers was a formidable .311, Robinson is perhaps best remembered for his daring, pigeon-toed base running. His long, dancing leads and false breaks on the base paths worried more than one pitcher into committing a balk or a wild pitch. He also made a specialty of the game's most thrilling play—before he retired from baseball in 1956, he had stolen home 19 times.

After Robinson's death, Yogi Berra, the former Yankee catcher who played against him in six World Series said simply, "He was a hard out."

Robinson leaps to catch a throw during pregame warm-ups at Brooklyn's Ebbets Field in 1947.



▶ **AWARDS & HONORS** World Series Champion 1955

▶ Six-time All-Star ▶ NL MVP 1949 ▶ NL batting champion 1949 ▶ NL stolen base leader 1947, 1949 ▶ No. 42 retired by all MLB teams ▶ Major League Baseball All-Century Team ▶ National Baseball Hall of Fame

Ronaldo after scoring a goal against Spain during the 2018 FIFA World Cup Group B game in Russia.



RONALDO

/SOCCER

B. 1985 | One could argue that Portuguese soccer star Cristiano Ronaldo is arrogant or amazing, but there's no doubt he's an influencer.

Ronaldo holds the overall record for goals as well as the records for most club goals of all time and most international goals of all time. He has played in a record-tying five World Cups, scoring eight times with two assists in 22 appearances. He was the first person ever to score in five different World Cups. He also holds the record for most Champions League goals of all time (141).

He debuted in September 2002 for the Portuguese professional team Sporting. He went on to play for English, Spanish, and Italian giants Manchester United, Real Madrid, and Juventus, respectively, before returning to Manchester United for a second stint. He is currently playing for Saudia Arabia's Al-Nassr FC.

Ronaldo's 20-plus-year career (he's still playing at 39) has made him a Portuguese national hero. TIME put him on the TIME100 in 2014, *Forbes* ranked him the world's highest paid athlete three times (2016, 2017, 2023), and ESPN declared him the world's most famous athlete four years in a row, 2016-'19. In 2024, Ronaldo was the most followed person on Instagram with 629 million followers—his rival Lionel Messi is second with 502 million.

In 2015, the University of British Columbia-Okanagan started offering a sociology course about Ronaldo. Professor Luis Aguiar said the idea came after he watched a World Cup qualifier where the broadcasters kept talking about what Ronaldo leading Portugal to the World Cup would mean for the country. (Although he has won an incredible amount of team and individual honors, Ronaldo has never won a World Cup.)

Having grown up in poverty himself, Ronaldo is generous with his billion-dollar fortune. In 2015, *DoSomething.org* named him its top athlete on their Athletes Gone Good list.

▶ AWARDS & HONORS Five-time Ballon D'Or Winner ▶ Premier League Player of the Season 2006, 2007, 2008 ▶ UEFA Club Footballer of the Year 2007, 2008 ▶ Seven European Golden Shoes ▶ FIFA Puskás Award 2009 ▶ Five UEFA Men's Player of the Year Awards ▶ La Liga Best Player 2013, 2014 ▶ FIFA Club World Cup Golden Ball 2016 ▶ The Best FIFA Men's Player 2016, 2017 ▶ UEFA European Championship Golden Boot 2020 ▶ Golden Foot 2020 ▶ The Best FIFA Special Award for Outstanding Career Achievement

BABE RUTH

/BASEBALL

1895-1948 | Babe Ruth was unforgettable, even when he struck out. His swing whirled him around until his slender legs were twisted beneath him. And the times when his bat did connect were baseball's biggest moments. The spell lasted until the Babe had trotted around the base paths, taking mincing steps on his small feet, tipping his cap to the mighty, reverent roar from the stands.

Sportswriters knocked themselves out thinking up new names and superlatives for him: "The Sultan of Swat," "The Bambino," "The Colossus of Clout." He didn't need all that; he was color itself—a fellow built on heroic, swaggering lines, an enormous head on a barrel of a body.

In the golden '20s, the years of the big names—Dempsey, Tilden, and Bobby Jones—Babe Ruth was the biggest draw of them all. With his big bat, he put baseball back on its feet and back in the hearts of the fans after the 1919 Black Sox Scandal.

Ruth began his big-league career as a crack southpaw pitcher for the Boston Red Sox. But he was also a slugger without peer, and when he clouted most of his then-record 714 home

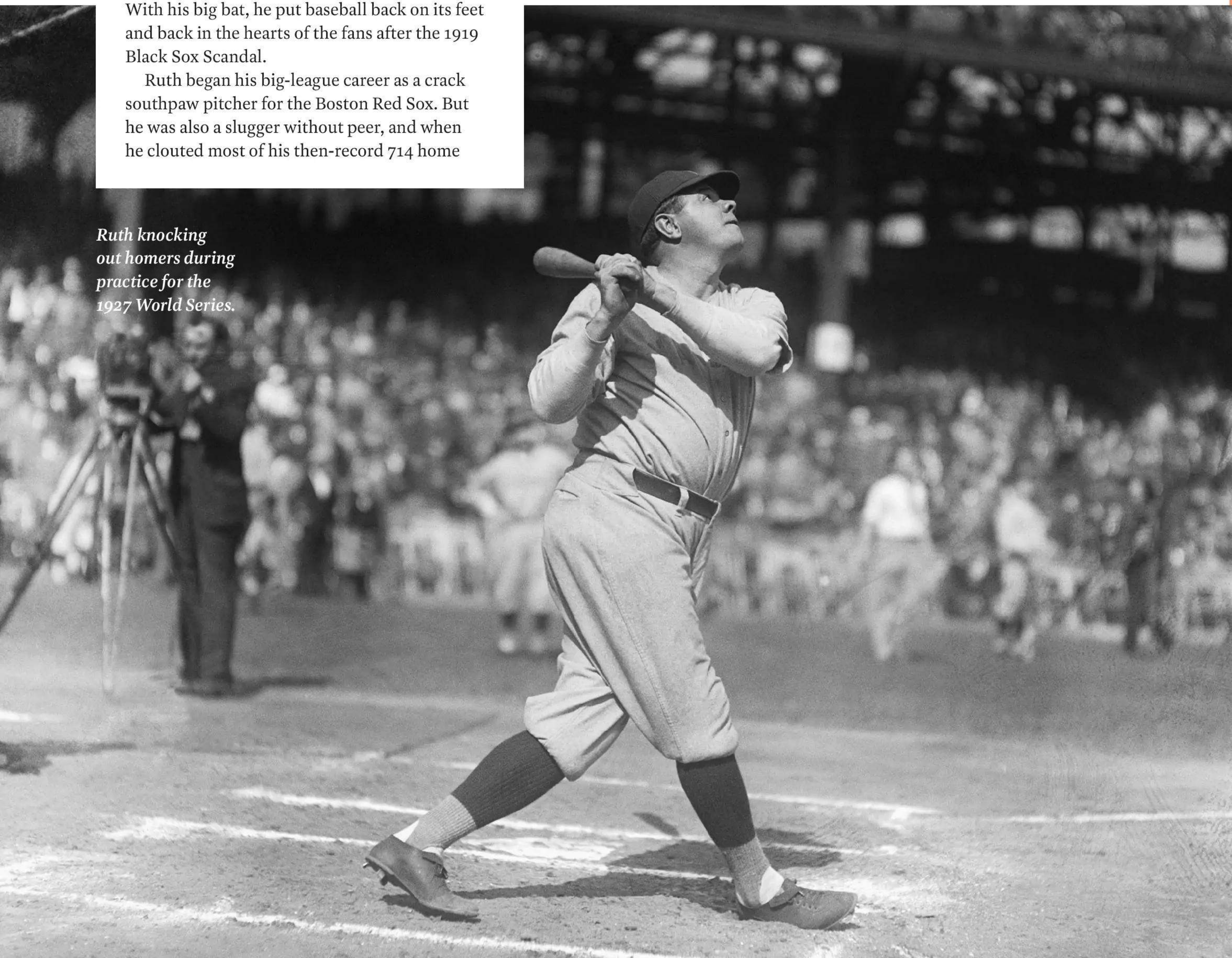
runs, he wore a New York Yankees uniform, playing the outfield. The son of a Baltimore saloonkeeper, Ruth was raised in a school for delinquents, and he never quite grew up. In his first years in baseball, he scoffed at training rules, took his drinks where he found them, abused umpires, and once ran up into the stands after an abusive fan.

Ruth's emotions were always out on the surface, which was one reason fans felt they knew and understood him. When New York politician Jimmy Walker publicly scolded him for being a bad influence on kids, the Babe gulped, and with enormous tears rolling down his enormous face, promised he would reform. He tried to. But nothing could stop him from living large.

AWARDS & HONORS

Seven-time World Series Champion > All-Star 1933, 1934 > 12-time AL home run leader > New York Yankees No. 3 retired > Boston Red Sox Hall of Fame > MLB All-Century Team > MLB All-Time Team > National Baseball Hall of Fame

Ruth knocking out homers during practice for the 1927 World Series.



Ryan pitches in the
1989 All-Star Game
at Anaheim Stadium.



NOLAN RYAN

/ BASEBALL

B. 1947 | Baseball is too often a cruel reminder of life's diminishing returns. Fans watch an aging hitter's creaky swing, or a runner's lethargy on the base paths, or a pitcher's loss of velocity and feel the beer breath of mortality on their own necks. But Nolan Ryan, whom sportswriter Thomas Boswell has called "the Act of God," is the wondrous exception to this melancholy rule: He pitched two no-hitters when he was in his 40s.

In total, Ryan pitched seven no-hit games during his 27 seasons—more than anyone else in baseball history. His all-time strikeout total (5,714) is more than 800 higher than Randy Johnson's second best. He allowed the fewest hits per nine innings (6.55) of any player in the game. He was the first pitcher to throw no-hitters in three different decades.

Watching Ryan's smooth, ferocious delivery, fans saw the sport at its elemental best. Flash, not finesse, is the hallmark of modern, macho baseball, where

a slugger would rather corkscrew himself into the batter's box on a swinging third strike than ground out meekly to the shortstop. This all-or-nothing attitude was catnip to Ryan, whose fastballs still approached stock-car speeds right up until the end. The hitters said, "Show me"—and he showed them up.

Every year or so, a doctor examined Ryan and announced that, no, there was nothing physically or genetically unique about the man. His exercise routine was strenuous but not fanatic; his preparation for each game was exhaustive; his dedication to the game was exemplary; his no-frills personality allowed him to focus utterly on the craft of humiliating batters. A healthy mind in a healthy body: as simple as one, two, three strikes, you're out.

Or so the argument goes. It does not convince most sandlot swamis who know that even to hurl a baseball at 70 mph to 100 mph is a preposterously unnatural activity. Many a splendid athlete has retired early after suffering a warped rotator cuff in his pitching arm. How could Ryan throw close to 100,000 pitches, most of them fastballs, in 27 pro seasons—and get better at it? Because he was the best. —with Richard Corliss

AWARDS & HONORS

World Series Champion 1969 > 11-time MLB strikeout leader > Eight-time All-Star > NL ERA leader 1981, 1987 > Los Angeles Angels No. 30 retired > Houston Astros No. 34 retired > Texas Rangers No. 34 retired > Los Angeles Angels Hall of Fame > Houston Astros Hall of Fame > Texas Rangers Hall of Fame > Major League Baseball All-Century Team > National Baseball Hall of Fame



*Sanders runs the ball
against the Tampa Bay
Buccaneers in 1994.*

BARRY SANDERS

/FOOTBALL

B. 1968 | In what is widely considered the greatest single season in college football history, Oklahoma State running back Barry Sanders set 25 NCAA records in 1988, including the marks for most rushing yards (2,628) and touchdowns (39) in a single season. Few have ever matched that performance. Then Sanders, a quiet star who shunned the limelight, became the NFL's third all-time leading rusher; he would have obliterated the record had he not abruptly retired after a sterling 10-year career.

During his 10 seasons with the silver-and-blue, Sanders became a darting, dodging Detroit institution. But there was one tackle he couldn't break: Detroit's other institution, losing. So Sanders woke up one day in 1999 and decided he couldn't do it another year. As his old teammates got ready for training camp back home, Sanders shocked fans by faxing his retirement to his hometown newspaper, the *Wichita Eagle*. "My desire to exit the game is greater than my desire to remain in it," he wrote.

Sanders' frustration with the Lions was muted but well-known, and evidently deep enough for him to give up a good chance of becoming the NFL's all-time leading rusher in the upcoming season. (He stood 1,458 yards short of then record-holder

Chicago Bear Walter Payton; Sanders averaged more than 1,500 yards a season in his career.) But many thought that his retirement wouldn't last and that he was just looking to bolt Detroit for a team with a chance of winning something.

But that was up to the Lions, who owned Sanders for another four seasons under a contract that had included a large signing bonus. Because of the NFL's complicated pay rules, the Lions couldn't trade Sanders without taking a one-time hit against their salary cap that would have crippled their ability to sign new players. Detroit still declined to trade or release Sanders even after he offered to pay back his bonus.

Sanders never returned to the game, but in 2017 he returned to Motor City as a brand ambassador for the Lions. —with Sean Gregory and Frank Pellegrini

▶ AWARDS & HONORS Heisman Trophy 1988 ▶ NFL MVP 1997 ▶ Six-time First-team All-Pro ▶ 10 Pro Bowls ▶ NFL 100th Anniversary All-Time Team ▶ Bert Bell Award 1991, 1997 ▶ Detroit Lions No. 20 retired ▶ Oklahoma State Cowboys No. 21 retired ▶ College Football Hall of Fame ▶ Pro Football Hall of Fame

*Scully doing
play-by-play
for NBC's Major
League Baseball
Game of the
Week in 1989.*



VIN SCULLY

/SPORTSCASTER

1927-2022 | Vin Scully is synonymous with the Dodgers baseball franchise. He spent 67 years with the team, beginning in 1950, when they played in Brooklyn, through their historic move across country to Los Angeles in 1958, until his retirement in 2016. Many fans at the L.A. Coliseum brought transistor radios to their seats in the early days, so Scully could teach them the game. “It’s time for Dodger baseball,” became his signature phrase.

Scully also worked for national networks, allowing his economical narratives and poetic incantations to resonate far beyond Los Angeles. So San Francisco 49ers fans heard him call a franchise-altering moment, the Joe Montana to Dwight Clark touchdown pass in the 1981 NFC championship game—aka football’s The Catch—on CBS. “Montana ... looking, looking ... throwing in the end zone ... Clark caught it!” On NBC, St. Louis Cardinals supporters got Scully on the call of Jack Clark’s game-deciding home run in Game 6 of the 1985 National League championship, the second straight game in which a Cardinal hit a heartbreaking homer off of Dodgers reliever Tom Niedenfuer. “You would think that the fates would be a little kinder to one man in such a short amount of time,” quipped Scully.

Play-by-play broadcasters trade in spoken words. Their impulse, for good reason, is to leave their mark on a moment. But after witnessing one of the most improbable endings in sports history—when the ball went through the legs of Red Sox first baseman Bill Buckner, allowing the Mets to score and win the 1986 World Series—Scully was silent for more than 3 minutes, an eternity in live TV. We saw the crowd noise shaking the cameras. We saw Buckner trudge off the field. We saw the Mets’ Ray Knight being mobbed by his ecstatic teammates.

Finally, Sully’s coda: “If one picture was worth a thousand words, you have seen about a million words.” —with Sean Gregory

▶ AWARDS & HONORS National Sports Media Association Sportscaster of the Year 1965, 1978, 1982, 2016 ▶ Ford C. Frick Award 1982 ▶ Lifetime Achievement Emmy Award 1997 ▶ MLB Commissioner’s Historic Achievement Award 2014 ▶ Presidential Medal of Freedom ▶ Hollywood Walk of Fame ▶ Los Angeles Dodgers microphone retired ▶ NAB Broadcasting Hall of Fame ▶ American Sportscasters Hall of Fame ▶ National Baseball Hall of Fame



Shiffrin skis the giant slalom in Kronplatz, Italy, during the 2023-'24 FIS Alpine Ski World Cup.

MIKAELA SHIFFRIN

/ALPINE SKIING

B. 1995 | American Mikaela Shiffrin has 97 World Cup wins—the most of any alpine skier, male or female. At the 2014 Olympics in Sochi, she became the youngest competitor to win a gold in the slalom event at just 18 years old. In 2018, she earned another Olympic gold medal in Pyeongchang in the giant slalom and a silver in combined.

“Mikaela’s the best I’ve ever seen, male or female, in a few different categories,” six-time Olympic medalist Bode Miller told *TIME* in 2018, ahead of the 2018 Olympics. He said he considered Shiffrin’s technical prowess and risk management unparalleled and couldn’t decide whether she compares more to LeBron James because of her physical gifts or to Michael Jordan, since she makes dominance look easy.

She may make it look easy, but Shiffrin plays a strong mental game. From an early age, she took

an interest in the mind-body aspects of sports. She read books like *The Inner Game of Tennis*, the seminal 1972 guide to quieting one’s mind in order to reach peak performance. “She was mindful as a 9-year-old,” says John Cole, human-performance director at Ski and Snowboard Club Vail, “before anyone knew what that was.”

Shiffrin has been similarly ahead of the curve on sleep. Ever since she played poorly in a middle-school soccer game after staying up late reading horror stories at a slumber party, she has been militant about getting enough shut-eye. She’s famous on the World Cup circuit for taking naps, on command, in chairlifts and on the floors of ski lodges.

Shiffrin went to high school at Burke Mountain Academy, a slopeside school for budding ski racers in Vermont. Even among her fellow athletes, she was single-minded in her devotion to training, often forgoing parties and dates.

Shiffrin’s dedication was clear, but she couldn’t avoid the anxiety that can derail a skier’s career. At the start of the 2016 season, she began to experience severe nausea before races. After consulting a sports psychologist, Shiffrin learned techniques to manage her nerves, then she racked up victory after victory. —with Sean Gregory

AWARDS & HONORS Skieur d’Or 2017, 2019, 2023 > ESPY Best Female Athlete 2023 > Time 100 Most Influential People 2023 > Laureus World Sports Sportswoman of the Year Award 2023

WILLIE SHOEMAKER

/HORSE RACING

1931-2003 | Willie Shoemaker was a thoroughbred jockey who rode winners in 11 Triple Crown races. At under 5 feet tall and weighing around 100 pounds, Shoemaker was a horse-track heavyweight, with 8,833 victories in 40,350 races between 1949 and 1990. He held the record for most wins as a professional jockey for 29 years.

Late *Los Angeles Times* sports columnist Jim Murray said Shoemaker rode “with the effortless ease and grace of a guy born to do what he was doing.” At age 54, when many thought his skills were in decline, Shoemaker steered 17-to-1 long shot Ferdinand to victory in the 1986 Kentucky Derby, making him the oldest jockey to ride a Derby winner.

Key to Shoemaker’s remarkable record was his flawless, sensitive riding style, *TIME* reported in 1962. “Willie takes such light hold of a horse,” said fellow jockey Eddie Arcaro, “that he could probably ride with silk threads for reins.” A master handicapper, Shoemaker was so adept at measuring a mount’s running ability that he was accused of

talking to his horses. Said a California racing official: “Two things stand out about Shoemaker. One is that he’s clean: He can maneuver at close quarters, but he never takes advantage of other riders. The other is his disposition. He’s a good winner and a good loser. He’s never over-elated, and he’s never discouraged.”

Hunched high and forward, his weight over his horse’s withers, Shoemaker was the picture of tranquility in the saddle. “The big thing is to relax,” he told *TIME* in 1962, after riding six winners in one day. “Lots of jocks don’t do that. They’re tense. Somehow I think my relaxation gets across to the horse, makes him want to run.”

Reared in Southern California, the Texas-born jockey had never ridden a thoroughbred before he quit school at 15 to work on a horse farm. Shoemaker suffered only two major injuries in his 41-year racing career but was paralyzed in a 1991 car crash when his Ford Bronco veered off a road and rolled. Racing was his love, so he continued to train horses from a wheelchair until 1997. —with Austin Ramzy

AWARDS & HONORS

Five-time U.S. champion

› George Woolf Memorial Jockey Award 1951 › Big Sport of Turfdom Award

1969 › Eclipse Award for Outstanding Jockey 1981

› Eclipse Award of Merit

1981 › Mike Venezia Memorial Award 1990

› Fair Grounds Racing Hall of Fame › National Museum of Racing and Hall of Fame

Shoemaker poses for a portrait in Los Angeles in 1988.



Smith running the ball during a regular season home game against the Arizona Cardinals in 1996.



EMMITT SMITH

/FOOTBALL

B. 1969 | The Dallas Cowboys were in a bit of a slump when they drafted University of Florida's Emmitt Smith seventh in the first round of the 1990 draft. It didn't take Smith long to prove that he could help Dallas turn things around. During his first season, he rushed nearly 1,000 yards and scored 11 touchdowns, earning him Offensive Rookie of the Year status. Twelve years later, Smith surpassed Walter Payton as the league's all-time leading rusher. He played for the Cowboys for 13 seasons, collecting three Super Bowl rings, and finished the last two years of his career with the Arizona Cardinals, amassing a NFL record 18,355 yards and a record 164 rushing touchdowns.

But Smith, who was a high-school standout in his home state of Florida, almost didn't make it on the college rosters, much less the NFL's. Self-described "Super Scout" Max Emfinger, who published an annual survey of the best high school players in the country, didn't include Smith in his top 50 rankings, noting that Smith was too small and too slow to make it. But the Gators took the gamble, and after Smith's first season, he ended up ninth in the Heisman Trophy balloting. His junior year, he was

SEC player of the year and a unanimous first-team All-American.

Smith left college after this junior year to join the Cowboys. Along with crack quarterback Troy Aikman and wide receiver "The Playmaker" Michael Irvin, the Cowboys won the league championship in 1992, and two more in the next three years, restoring the Dallas program to its former glory. In 1995, the trio, known as "The Triplets," joined the ranks of Cowboys greats Bob Lilly and Mel Renfro when they were inducted into the team's Ring of Honor—together.

After football, Smith would go on to acquire another trophy in a very different discipline. In 2006, he and dance partner Cheryl Burke won season three of *Dancing with the Stars*.

▶ AWARDS & HONORS Super Bowl MVP 1993 > NFL MVP 1993 > Bert Bell Award 1993 > NFL First team All-Pro 1992, 1993, 1994, 1995 > Eight Pro Bowls > NFL 1990s All-Decade Team > NFL 100th Anniversary All-Time Team > NFL rushing yards leader 1991, 1992, 1993, 1995 > NFL rushing touchdowns leader 1992, 1994, 1995 > College Football Hall of Fame > Pro Football Hall of Fame

Sörenstam plays a shot during the Thursday round at the 2022 PNC Championships.

A full-length photograph of Annika Sörenstam in the middle of a golf swing. She is wearing a light blue and white horizontally striped long-sleeved shirt, a light blue skirt, a white belt, a white visor with sunglasses, and white golf shoes. She is holding a golf club with both hands, and her body is twisted in the follow-through of the swing. The background is a blurred green golf course.

ANNIKA SÖRENSTAM

/GOLF

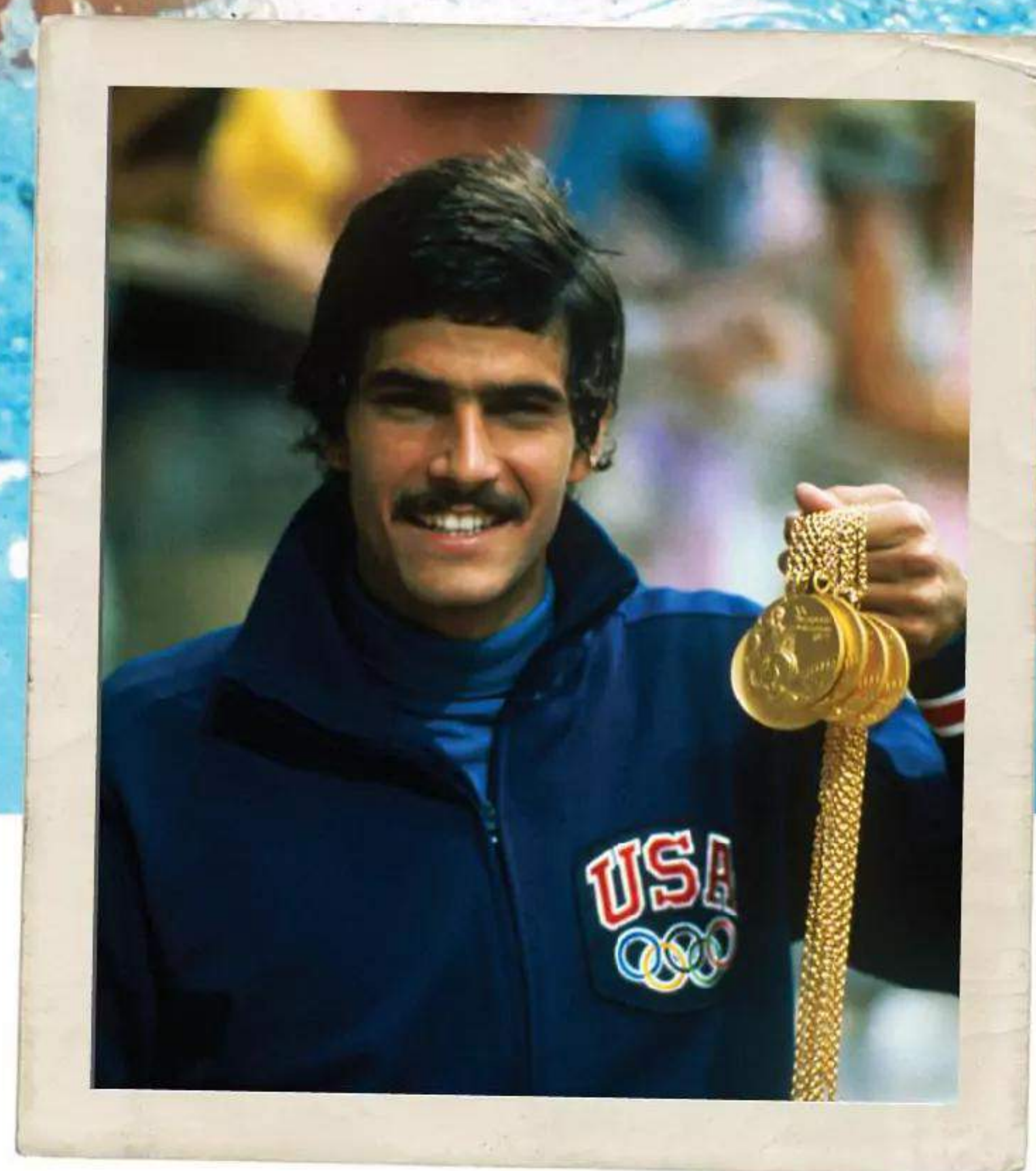
B. 1970 | Over her 15 years as a pro golfer, Sweden's Annika Sörenstam amassed over \$22 million in winnings. Although she retired in 2008, she still holds the top spot on the LPGA list for career earnings. She won a record 90 international tournaments and 72 official LPGA tournaments, including 10 majors. In 2001, she became the only woman in history to break 60 at an LPGA event. In 2021, she returned to the links to win the U.S. Senior Women's Open.

Sörenstam knows a thing or two about playing with the boys. In 2003, she became the first woman since Babe Zaharias to play in a PGA Tour event. (Zaharias did it in 1945.) She drew some pretty harsh criticism from the men: Fellow golfer Vijay Singh said that she had “no business” being there, and that, “She’s the best woman golfer in the world, and I want to emphasize woman. We have our tour for men, and they have their tour. She’s taking a spot from someone in the field.” Spectators wore little green buttons in support and the press cooed over her decent showing. And even though she didn’t make the cut—she missed by 4 strokes—she received a raucous standing ovation from the crowd. She was inducted into the World Golf Hall of Fame the same year.

She broke more ground, this time literally, working as a golf course architect, designing courses all over the world. In 2007, she set up the ANNIKA Foundation, which focuses on teaching children healthy lifestyles and offering aspiring junior golfers support. In 2024, she told CNN that each year, over 600 girls from 60 countries participate in the ANNIKA Foundation initiatives and it provides over \$9 million in funding for girls’ golf. “I really enjoy spending time with these young girls because I know what it’s like to be 14, 15 [years old], and having all these questions and dreams but don’t really know where to go,” she told the outlet. “To be able to get that guidance we feel is really important.”

AWARDS & HONORS Ladies European Tour Rookie of the Year 1993 > LPGA Tour Rookie of the Year 1994 > Ladies European Tour Order of Merit 1995 > Eight-time LPGA Player of the Year > Six LPGA Vare Trophies > Six ESPY Best Female Golfer Awards > ESPY Best Female Athlete of the Year 2005, 2006 > AP Female Athlete of the Year 2003, 2004, 2005 > Bob Jones Award 2012 > Old Tom Morris Award 2014 > Presidential Medal of Freedom

*Spitz training in 1990. Inset:
A mustached Spitz displays
his gold medals from the 1972
Olympics in Munich.*



MARK SPITZ

/SWIMMING

B. 1950 | American swimmer Mark Spitz won seven gold medals at the 1972 Olympics in Munich, each in record time. It took 36 years for another swimmer, Michael Phelps, to beat that medal count. Between the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City and his Munich haul, Spitz took home 11 medals: nine golds, a silver, and a bronze.

As a cocky 18-year-old in Mexico City, Spitz bragged that he would win six golds. Although he had already set many world records, he only won two golds, one in the 4 x 100-meter freestyle relay and one in the 4 x 200-meter relay. He took silver in the 100-meter butterfly and bronze in the 100-meter freestyle. The kid retreated from Mexico City like a wounded shark and enrolled that winter at Indiana University, the nation's most aquatics-minded learning institution.

In Munich, Spitz was 22, had matured, graduated from college, grown a famous mustache, and at one time or another broken 28 world freestyle and butterfly records. Spitz led the green but able American team through the competition with an incandescent performance that ranked with the legendary triumphs of Jim Thorpe and Jesse Owens.

First, it was the 200-meter butterfly: He knocked 2.6 seconds off his own world record of 2:3.3. Then he anchored the U.S. team to win the 4 x 100-meter freestyle relay later that night. The next evening, he clipped .72 of a second off his own world record in the 200-meter freestyle. By the end of the first week, he broke more records in the 100-meter butterfly (54.27 seconds) and 4 x 200-meter freestyle relay, tying the record for gold medals (five) set in 1920 by an Italian fencer, Nedo Nadi. Then Spitz took golds again in the 100-meter freestyle and the 4 x 100-meter medley relay.

Said Spitz before the Munich games: "I want to win at Munich and then quit. I never swam for glory, only the satisfaction of being recognized as the best in the world." Beyond all doubt, he achieved that goal. So he retired.

► **AWARDS & HONORS** International Swimming Hall of Fame
► International Jewish Sports Hall of Fame ► U.S. Olympic Hall of Fame ►
National Jewish Museum Sports Hall of Fame ► Indiana University Athletics
Hall of Fame

SACHIN TENDULKAR

/CRICKET

B. 1973 | Many Americans may not have heard of him, but in India, Sachin Tendulkar is a household name whose widespread worship borders on a religion. He retired in 2013 as the highest run-scorer in both ODI and Test cricket, and he holds the record for receiving the most player of the match awards in international cricket. The people of India made him a member of parliament even before he retired.

In cricket, a batsman who hits a century, or a “ton”—another term for a 100-plus-run innings—displays the most consistent measure of batting prowess. Great players end their careers with anywhere from 25 to 50 such scores. Tendulkar’s ton of tons is beyond great.

When he went out to bat, Tendulkar sought “the zone.” It’s a mental state familiar to great athletes in which the mind filters out the crowd, the opponents, the score, and other distractions; performance is guided by a magic combination of intuition and muscle memory. In a 2012 interview with *TIME*, Tendulkar spoke of it in terms more spiritual than sporting: “I need to surrender myself to my natural instincts,” he said. “My subconscious mind knows exactly what to do. It’s been trained to react for years.”

Tendulkar admitted he never quite mastered the ability to get into the zone at will, for which bowlers around the world must have been grateful.

It’s a miracle he could get there at all. Of Tendulkar’s many achievements as a cricketer, perhaps the most difficult was the one he had to repeat every time he batted for India: carrying the hopes and dreams of 1 billion people on his back. It is the heaviest burden borne by any modern sportsperson, and his ability to carry it for more than 20 years while utterly dominating his sport makes a good case that Tendulkar may be the world’s greatest athlete. —with Bobby Ghosh

Tendulkar raises his bat during a 2011 Group B ICC Cricket World Cup match against South Africa in Nagpur, India.



▶ AWARDS & HONORS Wisden Cricketer of the Year 1997
 ▶ Wisden Leading Cricketer in the World 1998, 2010 ▶ Cricket World Cup Player of the Tournament 2003 ▶ ICC World ODI XI 2004, 2007, 2010 ▶ Polly Umrigar Award 2006, 2007, 2009, 2010 ▶ ICC World Test XI 2009, 2010, 2011 ▶ Sir Garfield Sobers Trophy 2010 ▶ LG People’s Choice Award 2010 ▶ Castrol Indian Cricketer of the Year 2011 ▶ Wisden India Outstanding Achievement Award 2012 ▶ India Postage Stamp ▶ ESPNcricinfo Cricketer of the Generation 2014 ▶ Laureus World Sports Award for Best Sporting Moment 2000-2020 ▶ ICC Cricket Hall of Fame

JIM THORPE

/FOOTBALL, TRACK & FIELD, BASEBALL

1887-1953 | Jim Thorpe was born in a one-room log cabin near Prague, Oklahoma, to a Sac and Fox Nation mother and Irish father. They gave him the Sac and Fox tribal name Wa-Tho-Huck, meaning “Bright Path.” He was a muscular (5 feet, 11½ inches and 185 pounds) youngster of 19 when he caught the eye of football coach Glenn “Pop” Warner at the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania. Warner made Thorpe into a football player, and Thorpe made Warner’s Carlisle Indians famous. One of Thorpe’s biggest football thrills: “Running back two straight kickoffs for touchdowns against Army (and a cadet halfback named Ike Eisenhower) in 1912.” In the Olympics that year, with hardly any formal training, Thorpe won both the pentathlon and the decathlon. When he stepped up to receive his trophies from Sweden’s King Gustaf V, the King said, “You, sir, are the greatest athlete in the world.” Thorpe’s reply: “Thanks, King.”

Thorpe returned home a hero. Then it was discovered that he had played summer baseball in 1909 and 1910—for \$25 a week, which made Thorpe a professional. When a stern-eyed Amateur Athletic Union demanded he return his Olympic medals and trophies, Thorpe meekly handed them over.

Since Thorpe had unwittingly become a pro, he tried to make the most of it. In 1913, he signed with the New York Giants as an outfielder and played off and on in the National League until 1919. But it was pro football where Thorpe made his fame, if not his fortune. A longtime star of Ohio’s Canton Bulldogs, he ended his playing days in 1929, a tough old man of 41.

Thorpe tried his hand at golf (low 80s), bowling (over 200), and was proficient at hockey, lacrosse, swimming, rifle shooting, squash, handball, and horsemanship. But two years after he hung up his cleats, a reporter discovered him working with a pick and shovel for four dollars a day. Sadly, Thorpe’s fondness for booze had stalled his sports career.

From then on, Thorpe made the papers now and again as a night watchman, an able-bodied seaman, movie extra, lecturer, and bouncer. Evidently, the “greatest athlete in the world” was also a human.

Thorpe poses for a photo in his Canton Bulldogs uniform.



AWARDS & HONORS Olympic Medals reinstated 2002
➤ Pro Football Hall of Fame ➤ National Native American Hall of Fame ➤
Reverse of Sacajawea Dollar 2018 ➤ U.S. Postage Stamp



*Uecker at the dugout
before the Milwaukee
Brewers 2023 home
opener at American
Family Field.*

BOB UECKER

/SPORTSCASTER

B. 1934 | On April 2, 2024, Milwaukee Brewers (and Minnesota Twins) fans welcomed 90-year-old Bob Uecker with a hearty ovation: “Ueck! Ueck! Ueck!” when the broadcaster appeared on the video board at American Family Field. Why? Uecker, aka Mr. Baseball, was there to do play-by-play for his 54th straight season with the Brewers.

Uecker was a catcher in the majors from 1962 to 1967 with the Milwaukee/Atlanta Braves, St. Louis Cardinals, and Philadelphia Phillies, but he didn’t become a national celebrity until after his playing career was over. Uecker, a Milwaukee native, began calling Brewers games in 1971 and also worked as a national color commentator for ABC and NBC baseball telecasts. His charisma and self-deprecating humor landed him on late-night talk shows—he was a favorite of Johnny Carson’s, appearing some 100 times. (Uecker said Carson was the first to call him Mr. Baseball.) He also starred in the ABC sitcom *Mr. Belvedere*, playing a sportswriter, from 1985 to 1990.

Miller Lite beer used Uecker in commercials in the 1980s as well. A classic from 1984 features Uecker walking through the stands at a Brewers game, but

no one seems to recognize him. When Uecker takes his seat, an usher approaches and tells him he’s in the wrong seat. Uecker replies, “I must be in the front row!” as he is escorted toward the nosebleeds.

Uecker also played the commentator in the 1989 hit film *Major League*, a fictionalized version of the Cleveland Indians baseball team. His famous line, delivered after Ricky “Wild Thing” Vaughn, played by Charlie Sheen, threw a pitch a few feet to the right of the plate was deadpan: “Juuust a bit outside.”

Ueck has scaled back to calling only home games in the past few years. For the 2024 season, he has a “handshake deal” with Brewers owner Mark Attanasio. The two decided to take it one day at a time. “It’s his booth and he can do what he wants in that booth,” Attanasio told the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*.

▶ AWARDS & HONORS World Series Champion 1964 ▶ Ford C. Frick Award 2003 ▶ National Radio Hall of Fame ▶ Baseball Reliquary’s Shrine of the Eternals ▶ Wisconsin Sportscaster Hall of Fame ▶ Milwaukee Brewers Ring of Honor ▶ American Family Field Walk of Fame



Vonn after her gold-medal finish in the downhill at the 2010 Olympics in Whistler, Canada.

LINDSEY VONN

/ALPINE SKIING

B. 1984 | There's no doubt about it, alpine skier Lindsey Vonn is tough. Despite being bitten by injuries throughout her remarkable career, she compiled more World Cup wins—82—than any female ski racer in history. At the 2006 Torino Olympics, for example, she crashed during a training run and had to be airlifted off the mountain. The accident, however, didn't keep her from competing in the downhill, where she finished eighth. But crashes did end her 2013, 2014, and 2016 seasons prematurely.

In November 2016, Vonn broke her right arm while training in Cooper Mountain, Colorado. And that December, she hurt her back during a Super-G race in St. Mortiz, Switzerland. She roiled in pain

after crossing the finish, and came in 24th place. But just a week later Vonn was back atop a podium, winning in Val d'Isere.

While most of Vonn's World Cup victories have come in the speed disciplines of the downhill and Super G, she's the rare elite skier to have won races in both speed and technical events. She has four giant slalom wins, two victories in the slalom, and five in the combined, which mixes the downhill and slalom.

Her 43 wins in the downhill and 28 in the Super G are an all-time mark. She's tied with Sweden's Ingemar Stenmark for most discipline titles, with 16. Vonn has been the best downhill skier in eight different seasons, while also winning five Super-G titles and three championships in the combined.

At the Olympics, Vonn won a downhill gold medal and Super-G bronze at the 2010 Games in Vancouver. After missing Sochi, she picked up another bronze in the downhill at the 2018 Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang. When she won that bronze, knowing it would be her last Olympics, she said, "I'm standing on the podium. And to me, I feel like I won a gold medal." She retired from competition in 2019. —with Sean Gregory

▶ AWARDS & HONORS U.S. Olympic Spirit Award 2006 ▶ Skieur d'Or Award 2009 ▶ Laureus Sportswoman of the Year 2010 ▶ AP Female Athlete of the Year 2010 ▶ USOC Sportswoman of the Year 2010 ▶ ESPY Best Female Athlete Award 2010, 2011 ▶ TIME 100 Most Influential People 2013 ▶ Princess of Asturias Award for Sports 2019 ▶ U.S. Olympic Hall of Fame

J.J. WATT

/FOOTBALL

B. 1989 | Former NFL defensive end J.J. Watt may have hit hard, but he was a heck of a nice guy. On the field, he was known for his power, speed, and agility. The three-time NFL Defensive Player of the Year ended his 12-year career, primarily with the Houston Texans, with 586 tackles, 114.5 sacks, 70 pass deflections, 27 forced fumbles, and 17 fumble recoveries. Off the field, he is known for his generosity.

In 2017, Watt started a relief fund for the victims of Hurricane Harvey and personally donated \$100,000. His crowdfunding efforts drew support from high-profile individuals in and out of Texas. Former President George H.W. Bush shared Watt's fundraising page on Twitter, and talk show hosts Ellen DeGeneres and Jimmy Fallon contributed \$1 million each. Watt ended up raising over \$37 million, received NFL's Walter Payton Man of the Year award, and was named *Sports Illustrated* Sportsman of the Year.

In 2018, Watt offered to pay the funeral expenses for the eight students and two teachers who lost

their lives in a school shooting in Santa Fe, Texas. He also offered to pay the funeral expenses for the victims of the attack on the Waukesha, Wisconsin, Christmas parade in 2021 and sent a surprise video message to one of the teens injured in the tragedy. (Watt was born in Wisconsin and graduated from the University of Wisconsin.) The former Texans star also runs his own charity, the JJ Watt Foundation, which helps create after-school athletic programs for poorly-funded schools in Texas and Wisconsin.

Watt retired at age 33 in 2022 without a Super Bowl ring. At a press conference, he said, "I'm walking away with nothing but love and gratitude. Did I win a championship? No. But I literally lived out a dream that millions of people would kill for. I have a job that anybody would love. I literally get to do things that I never in my wildest dreams thought I could do. I may not have a trophy, but I'm doing alright and I'm extremely thankful." —with Sean Gregory

AWARDS & HONORS

Five-time First team All-Pro > Five Pro Bowls > NFL sacks leader 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015 > NFL All-Decade Team 2010s > AP NFL Defensive Player of the Year 2012, 2014, 2015 > *Sporting News* Defensive Player of the Year 2012, 2014, 2015 > Bert Bell Award 2014 > TIME 100 Most Influential People 2018

Watt takes the field before a home game against the New England Patriots in December 2013.



SERENA WILLIAMS

/TENNIS

B. 1981 | After winning the 2003 Australian Open, Serena Williams became just the fifth female in tennis history to hold the titles of all four Grand Slam tournaments—the Australian Open, the French Open, Wimbledon, and the U.S. Open—at the same time. She gave her feat an alliterative flourish that neatly spoke truth to her power: the Serena Slam. Williams even bested her closest confidante, older sister Venus, in the final of all four of those major championships. “I’d kind of like to be just like her,” Venus, at the time a four-time Grand Slam winner, said after that Aussie Open final.

Serena was just 21 years old. If she had peaked then, she would have earned accolades as an all-time great. But nearly two decades and 23 major titles—second most in the Open Era—later, she has more clout than ever.

Williams’s influence extends far beyond the baseline. Critics have called her racist names and tried to shame her for her muscular frame. But she has embraced her body, and her Blackness, with the same force as one of her two-handed backhands: Even her occasional outbursts at umpires spark national debates about decorum and double standards.

She’s battled injuries and life-threatening illnesses, including a complicated delivery of her daughter Olympia in 2017. Months later, however, Williams, then 36, returned to the women’s tour as the world’s most famous working mom. She’s since reached the finals of four major events, showing that women can embrace motherhood and a job as time-consuming and physically grueling as professional tennis.

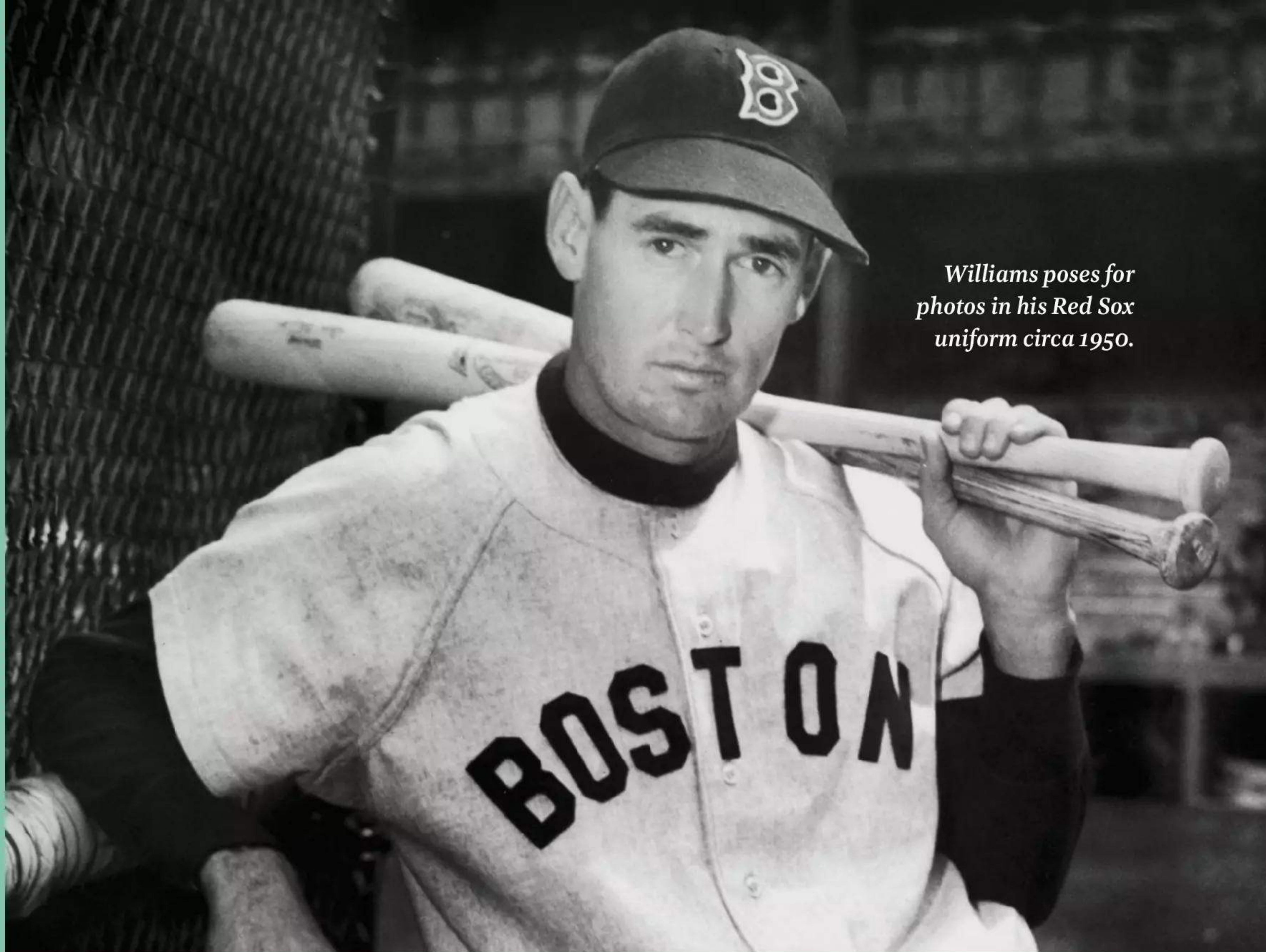
In her decades of greatness, Williams has inspired a new generation of tennis talent: young women of color who, like her, dared to take up what had been a lily-white sport. Williams has not only taken women’s tennis to new heights, she has secured her legacy in the generations that will follow her.

—with Sean Gregory



Williams celebrating a second-round singles victory against Christina McHale at Wimbledon in 2016.

AWARDS & HONORS Five-time AP Female Athlete of the Year > Five WTA World Championships > Four Olympic gold medals > 10 ESPYs for Best Female Tennis Player > ESPY Best Female Athlete 2003, 2013 > Laureus World Sports Award for Sportswoman of the Year 2003, 2010, 2016, 2018 > AP Athlete of the Decade 2010 > TIME 100 Most Influential People 2014 > Sports Illustrated Sportsperson of the Year 2015 > Jackie Robinson Sports Award 2023



Williams poses for photos in his Red Sox uniform circa 1950.

TED WILLIAMS

/BASEBALL

1918-2002 | Ted Williams, who retired in 1960 but still has the highest on-base percentage of all time, earned the fear of pitchers. But what he wanted was the respect of the boo-birds in Boston. “The Splendid Splinter”—the last major leaguer to hit .400, and owner of six batting titles over a 22-year span (during which he took five seasons off for World War II and, as a combat pilot, in the Korean War)—was himself as conflicted, splintered, as a Eugene O’Neill tragic hero. He felt most sportswriters rode him unjustly and that the fans—especially in Boston—were a loud, unappreciative lot. “I will never,” he liked to repeat, “tip my cap to them!”

Sullen yet sensitive, he gave the finger to Red Sox fans but was eager to hear the sound of 66,000 hands clapping. He stoked controversy even after his death, when family members argued bitterly over whether to freeze his remains. Williams’ goal was to be known as the greatest hitter who ever lived. That designation may unfairly exclude guys named Ruth,

Cobb, Mays, Bonds—and DiMaggio, his greatest rival. But no one brought more pure skill and science to the simple, impossible task of watching a ball approach at 95 mph and whacking the cover off it.

Williams hit the longest homer of his distinguished career on June 9, 1946, off of Detroit Tigers’ Fred Hutchinson. The ball ended up in the 30th row of the Fenway Park bleachers, breaking the straw hat of a construction worker named Joseph A. Boucher, who happened to be a Yankees fan. Serves him right. According to legend, the reporters who interviewed Boucher afterward asked if he’d contemplate switching his support after Williams doinked him with a long ball. This seems like the last thing a fan would do—that ball could have killed him. But Boucher said the incident was a possible sign to root for Boston or suffer the consequences, so he switched his allegiance. The next day, the headlines could barely contain their glee: “Williams Knocks Sense into Yankees Fan.” —with Richard Corliss and Glen Levy

▶ AWARDS & HONORS 19-time MLB All-Star > Boston Red Sox No. 9 retired > Major League Baseball All-Century Team > Major League Baseball All-Time Team > National Baseball Hall of Fame > Boston Red Sox Hall of Fame > San Diego Padres Hall of Fame > Bob Feller Act of Valor Award > Presidential Medal of Freedom



Woods celebrates after sinking his final putt to win the 2019 Masters Tournament in Augusta, Georgia.

TIGER WOODS

/GOLF

B. 1975 | Tiger Woods has won 15 major golf championships. His 82 PGA tournament victories are tied with Sam Snead for most of all time.

Like many greatest-of-all-time players in other sports, Woods not only dominated his sport but changed the way it was played—and the way it will be played by the next generation. “It’s cool now to play golf,” Woods told *TIME* in 2000. In 1996, he started the Tiger Woods Foundation to help make courses and equipment available to more underprivileged kids, many of them Black, Hispanic, and Asian. “Just imagine,” Woods mused, his eyes lit, “if Michael Jordan, with his size and strength and hand-eye coordination, had started playing golf early?”

Any would-be Tigers will, in fact, have to start early. Tiger’s dad Earl, a Green Beret lieutenant

colonel in Vietnam, took up golf in his 40s, a few years before Tiger was born. Though he eventually became a 1-handicapper, Earl’s struggles convinced him that kids should be taught the game as soon as they’re capable of swinging a sawed-off club. For his son, that was at 10 months. Tiger took a strong interest in the game, which, by all accounts, his parents managed to encourage without pushing and while keeping things fun.

But it hasn’t always been fun for the adult Tiger, whose star-studded career was plagued with dirty laundry, including an infidelity scandal and car crash in 2009, the loss of sponsorships, a highly publicized divorce, back surgery, and a 2017 DUI arrest. He competed in only one tournament between August 2015 and January 2018, but came back to win the Masters in 2019. Justin Timberlake wrote of that win in a *TIME* 100 tribute to Woods, describing it as “arguably the greatest comeback in sports history. What a dream come true. For Tiger. For all of us.”

In 2021, Woods shattered his ankle in a serious car crash, but he got back out there. He finished 47th in the 2022 Masters, had to withdraw in 2023, and squeaked out a finish in 2024, although it was his highest score as a pro. He didn’t make the cut at the 2024 PGA Championship in May, but plans to play the U.S. Open and British Open later this year. Tiger Woods is no quitter.

▶ **AWARDS & HONORS** 11-time PGA Tour Player of the Year ▶ 10-time PGA Tour Money List Winner ▶ 14 Mark H. McCormack Awards ▶ 11 Vardon Trophies ▶ Nine Bryon Nelson Awards ▶ PGA Tour Fed Ex Cup Winner 2007, 2009 ▶ *TIME* 100 Most Influential People 2004, 2009, 2019 ▶ Presidential Medal of Freedom

CY YOUNG

/BASEBALL

1867-1955 | One summer afternoon in 1890, a gawky farm hand named Denton True Young came down from the Ohio hills to try out as a pitcher for the Canton baseball team of the Tri-State League. He had no uniform, and the Canton manager did not even bother to use a catcher. One of the team's best batters simply stood in front of the grandstand, and the kid started firing the ball past him. The batter never got a piece of it, and the big farmer's fastball almost tore up the grandstand backboard. "Looks like a cyclone hit it," said the Canton manager. That day, "Cyclone" Young had earned a nickname and a place in organized ball.

Even in that era of iron men, the 6-foot, 2-inch, 210-pound fireballer was a standout. In 22 years divided between Cleveland, St. Louis, and Boston in the National League, and Boston and Cleveland in the American League, he started in 874 games and won 511. Young always claimed that he had won 512; either way, his record is still unbroken.

Unbroken also are his records of appearing in most career innings pitched (7,356), most career games started (815), most complete games (749), and the astonishing record of 25½ consecutive hitless innings pitched he threw in 1904. In 14 seasons he won 20 or more games; for five seasons he won more than 30. In 1904, pitching for Boston against Philadelphia, Young became the third pitcher in major-league history to pitch a perfect game.

As a big-league ball player, Young never earned more than \$2,500 a season, but he thought nothing of working in both halves of a double header. He never bothered much with fancy stuff—never threw a spitter even though it was legal, never relaxed with a change of pace. He relied on his fastball and a variety of tricky curves.

No matter how often he pitched, Young could always hold his own with the best of his day. It's only fitting that each year, the best MLB pitcher receives the Cy Young Award.

AWARDS & HONORS

Triple Crown 1901

► World Series Champion

1903 ► 5-Time MLB

Wins Leader ► Boston

Red Sox Hall of Fame

► Cleveland Guardians

Hall of Fame ► Major

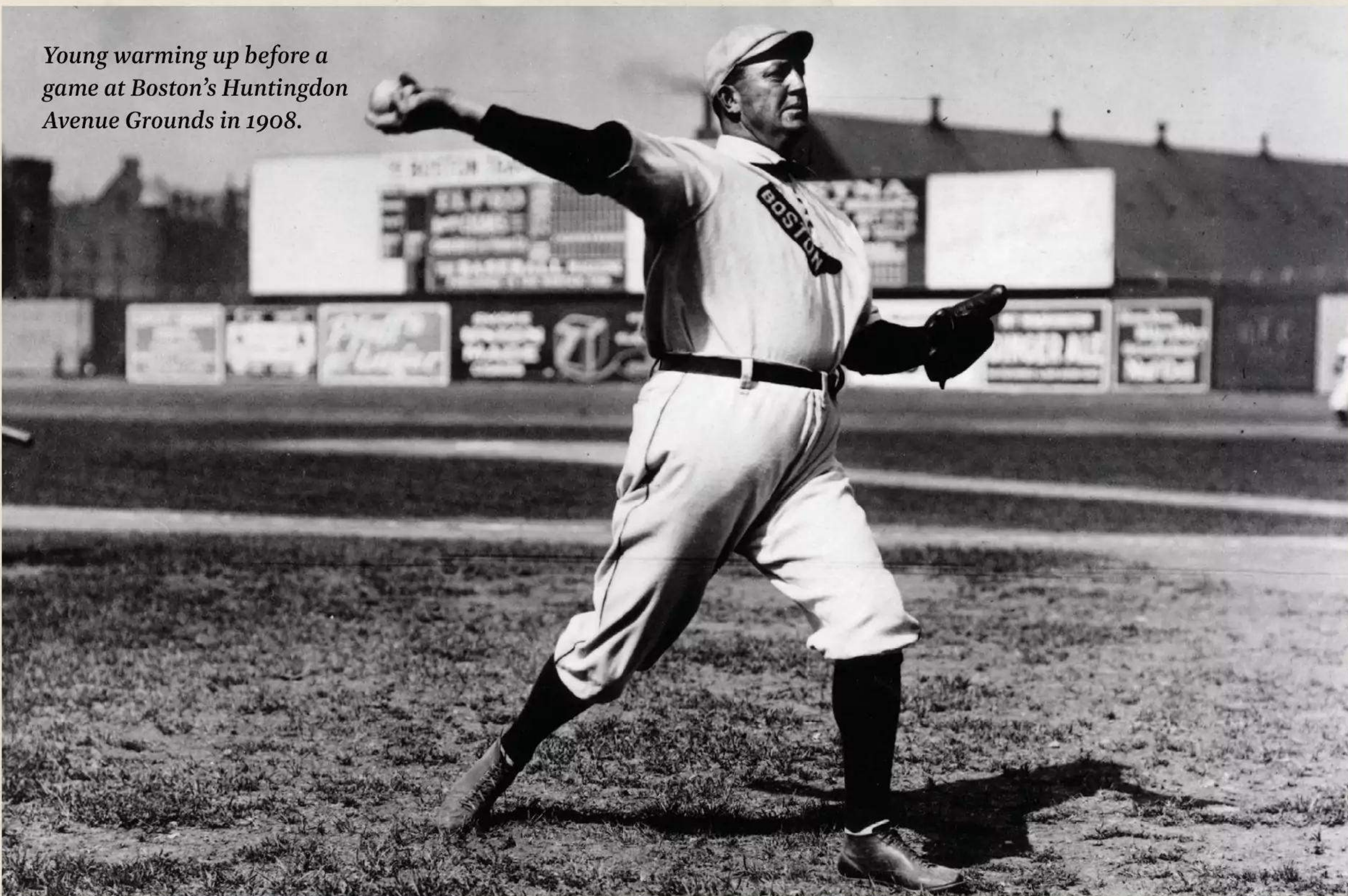
League Baseball All-

Century Team ► National

Baseball Hall of Fame

► U.S. Postage Stamp

Young warming up before a game at Boston's Huntington Avenue Grounds in 1908.



TIME

SPORTS GREATS

Editor-in-Chief Sam Jacobs

Managing Editor Lily Rothman

Creative Director D.W. Pine

Senior Design Coordinator Skye Quinn

Director of Photography Katherine Pomerantz

Project Editor & Writer Julie Blume Benedict

Project Art Director Courtney Lentz

Copy Editor Mary-Liz Shaw

CEO Jessica Sibley

COO Mark Howard

Chief Revenue Officer Eric Kelliher

Retail Sales & Business Development Lisa MacDonald

Consumer Marketing Maya Draisin

Published by TIME. All rights reserved. Reproduction in whole or in part without prior permission from the publisher is prohibited.

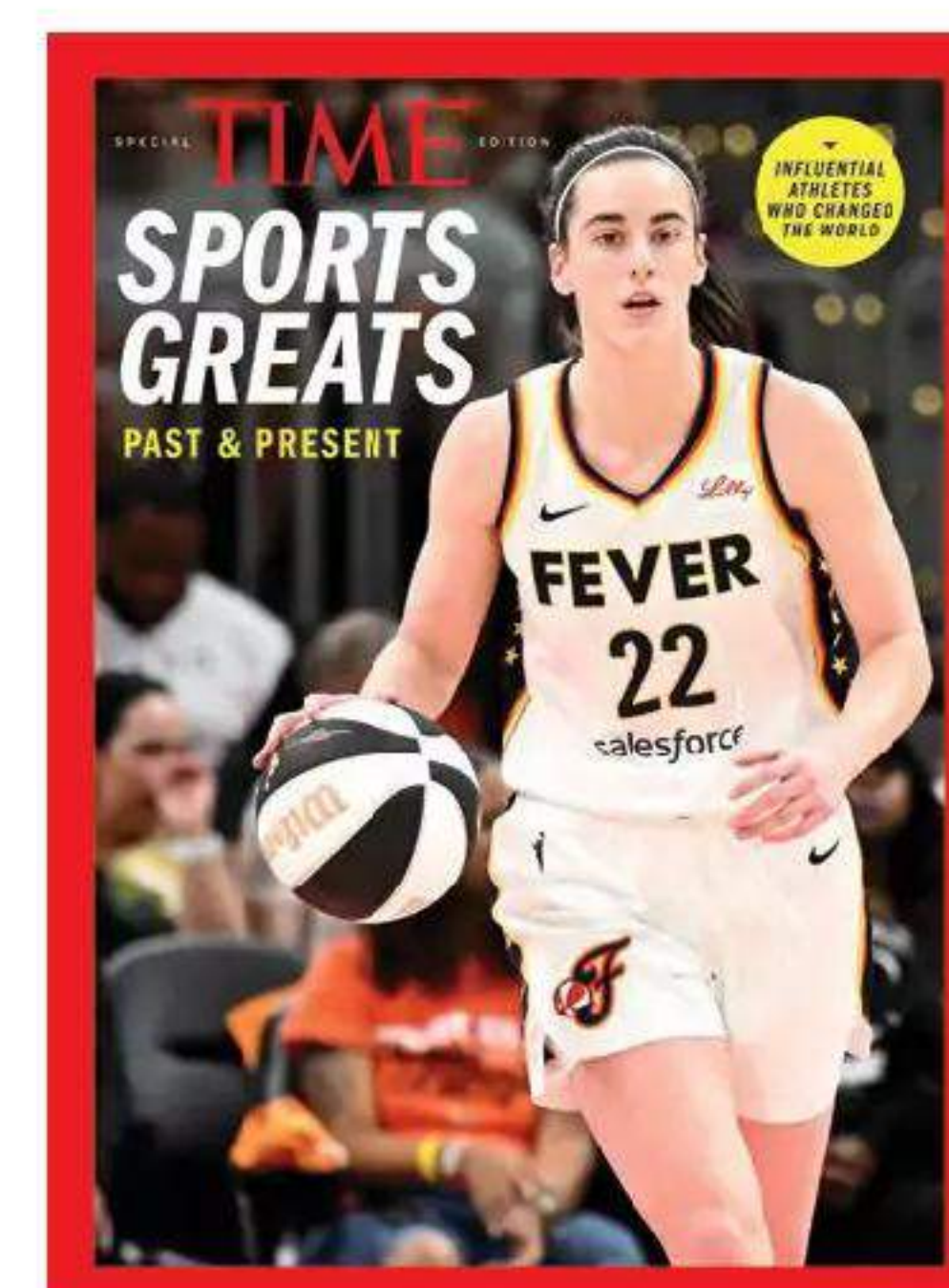
PRINTED IN THE USA



ON THE COVERS

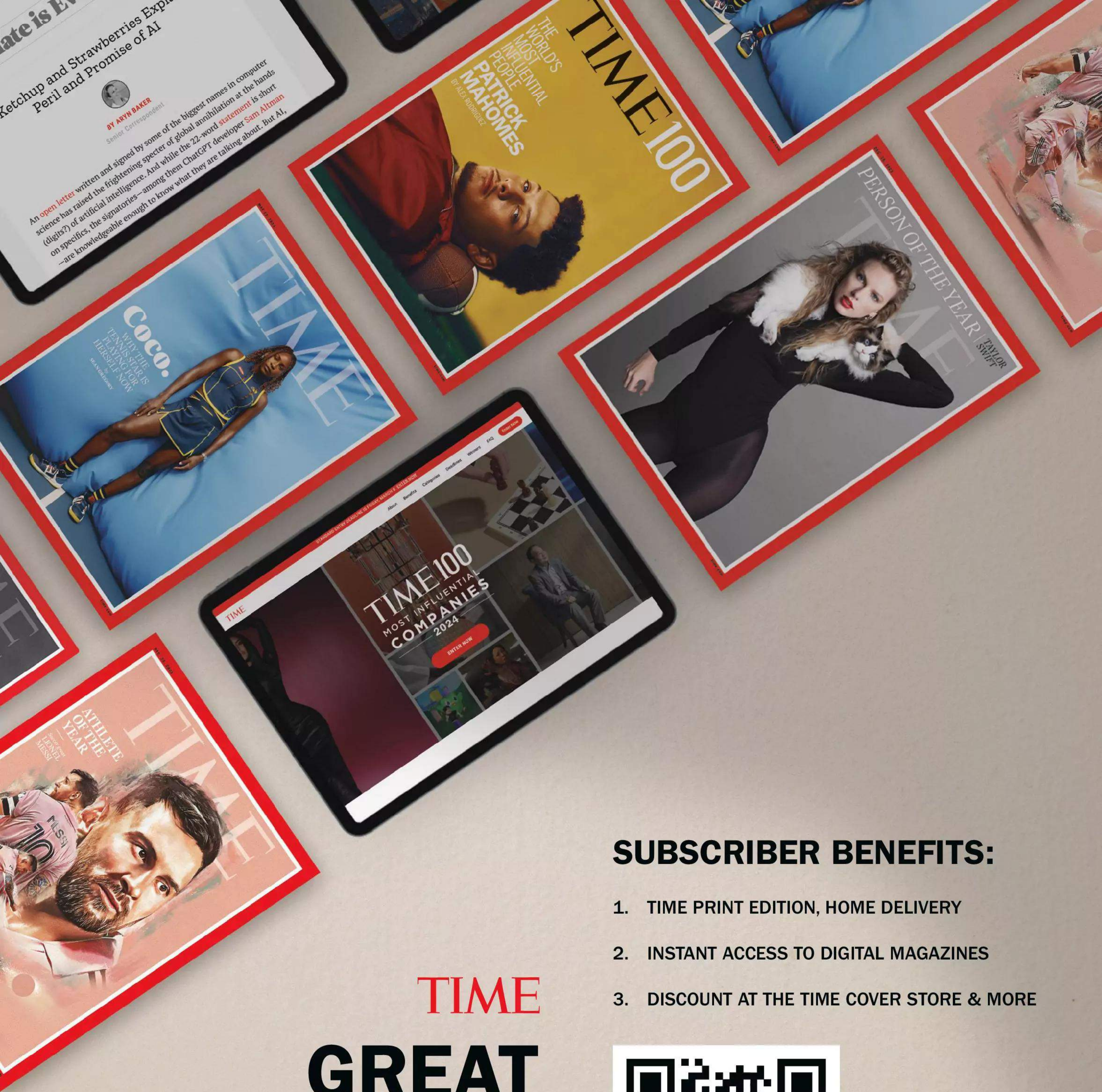
Left: LeBron James, Patrick Mahomes, Caitlin Clark, Simone Biles, Aaron Judge

Center: Travis Kelce **Right:** Caitlin Clark



/CREDITS

Cover Multi-Image: Ethan Miller/Getty Images (2); Elsa/Getty Images; Naomi Baker/Getty Images; Ryan Kang/Getty Images (2) **Kelce:** Cooper Neill/Getty Images **Clark:** G Fiume/Getty Images **1** Matthew Holst/Getty Images **2** Bettmann/Getty Images (2); subjug/Getty Images **3** Focus On Sport/Getty Images **4** Bettmann/Getty Images **5** Bettmann/Getty Images; subjug/Getty Images **6** Patrick McDermott/Getty Images **7** David Ashdown/Getty Images **8** Laurence Griffiths/Getty Images; Jamie Squire/Getty Images; subjug/Getty Images **9** Rick Stewart/Getty Images **10** Chris Cole/Getty Images **11** Michael Steele/Getty Images **12** Getty Images/Getty Images; Tolga Tezcan/Getty Images **13** Tom Pennington/Getty Images **14** Lisa Blumenfeld/Getty Images **15** Focus On Sport/Getty Images **16** Matthew Holst/Getty Images **17** Don Morley/Getty Images; Tolga Tezcan/Getty Images; Wally McNamee/Getty Images **18** Focus On Sport/Getty Images **19** Stacy Revere/Getty Images **20** Bettmann/Getty Images (4) **21** Tolga Tezcan/Getty Images; Bettmann/Getty Images **22** Clive Brunskill/Getty Images **23** Robert Alexander/Getty Images **24** Clive Brunskill/Getty Images; Tolga Tezcan/Getty Images **25** ABC Photo Archives/Getty Images **26** Bettmann/Getty Images **27** Bettmann/Getty Images **28** Transcendental Graphics/Getty Images **29** Tolga Tezcan/Getty Images; Mike Powell/Getty Images **30** B Bennett/Getty Images **31** Dan Istitene/Getty Images **32** Al Messerschmidt/Getty Images **33** George Rinhart/Getty Images; Tolga Tezcan/Getty Images **34** Bettmann/Getty Images **35** Christian Petersen/Getty Images **36** Bob Rosato/Getty Images; Ethan Miller/Getty Images; subjug/Getty Images **37** Pascal Rondeau/Getty Images **38** New York Daily News Archive/Getty Images **39** Rick Stewart/Getty Images **40** Jeff Haynes/Getty Images; Manny Millan/Getty Images; subjug/Getty Images **41** David Madison/Getty Images **42** Elsa/Getty Images **43** Ryan Kang/Getty Images **44** Fox Photos/Getty Images **45** Tolga Tezcan/Getty Images; Evening Standard/Getty Images **46** Clive Rose/Getty Images **47** Focus On Sport/Getty Images **48** Bettmann/Getty Images (2); subjug/Getty Images **49** Gilbert lundt/Getty Images **50** Bettmann/Getty Images **51** The Ring Magazine/Getty Images; subjug/Getty Images **52** Ezra Shaw/Getty Images **53** New York Daily News Archive/Getty Images **54** Mark Leech/Offside/Getty Images **55** The Stanley Weston Archive/Getty Images **56** Alex Livesey/FIFA/Getty Images **57** Bettmann/Getty Images **58** Mike Ehrmann/Getty Images; Tolga Tezcan/Getty Images **59** ABC Photo Archives/Getty Images **60** Focus On Sport/Getty Images **61** Tony Duffy/Getty Images **62** Julian Finney/Getty Images **63** Trevor Jones/Getty Images **64** David Cannon/Getty Images **65** Lucy Nicholson/Getty Images **66** ullstein bild Dtl./Getty Images **67** George Tiedemann/Getty Images; Tolga Tezcan/Getty Images **68** Bettmann/Getty Images **69** Owen C. Shaw/Getty Images **70** Ian MacNicol/Getty Images; Tolga Tezcan/Getty Images **71** Brad Smith/ISI Photos/USSF/Getty Images **72** Bill Frakes/Getty Images **73** David Madison/Getty Images **74** Ezra Shaw/Getty Images **75** Newsday LLC/Getty Images **76** Transcendental Graphics/Getty Images **77** Dean Mouhtaropoulos/Getty Images **78** Bettmann/Getty Images **79** David Madison/Getty Images; Tolga Tezcan/Getty Images **80** John Biever/Getty Images **81** NBC/Getty Images **82** Alain Grosclaude/Agence Zoom/Getty Images **83** Aaron Rapoport/Getty Images **84** Jamie Squire/Getty Images **85** David Cannon/Getty Images **86** Paul Harris/Getty Images; subjug/Getty Images; Bettmann/Getty Images **87** Daniel Berehulak/Getty Images **88** Hulton Archive/Getty Images **89** Jeffrey Phelps/Getty Images **90** Clive Mason/Getty Images **91** Scott Halleran/Getty Images; Tolga Tezcan/Getty Images **92** Clive Brunskill/Getty Images **93** FPG/Getty Images **94** Kevin C. Cox/Getty Images **95** subjug/Getty Images; Transcendental Graphics **96** John W. McDonough/Getty Images



TIME GREAT THINGS TAKE TIME

DON'T MISS A MOMENT

SUBSCRIBER BENEFITS:

1. TIME PRINT EDITION, HOME DELIVERY
2. INSTANT ACCESS TO DIGITAL MAGAZINES
3. DISCOUNT AT THE TIME COVER STORE & MORE



[TIME.COM/SUBSCRIBE](https://time.com/subscribe)

TIME COVER STORE



ENJOY TIME AT HOME

SHOP SOME OF TIME'S MOST ICONIC COVER ART

[TIMECOVERSTORE.COM](https://timecoverstore.com)

